

Thousands of Urbana Attendees Bring in New Year With Commitment to Missions

☒ Thousands of college students from across the United States and Canada rang in the new year by making a fresh commitment to missions, responding to a call to their generation to mesh evangelism with social advocacy.

More than 16,000 students, missions leaders and pastors converged at the Americas Center in St. Louis, Dec. 27-31 for the 22nd tri-annual Urbana Student Missions Conference sponsored by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Focusing on the conference theme “He Dwells With Us,” Urbana 09 director Jim Tebbe called on attendees to expand their vision of missions, seeing it not only as a global thrust but also as a local Bible study, outreach and service project.

“We want to see people start to live out what they have learned within weeks rather than waiting years to go on the mission field,” added Urbana spokesman Gordon Govier.

With an eye toward immediate mobilization of attendees, the Urbana conference featured Bible studies, plenary sessions, and workshops tailored to specific themes. Tracks included evangelism, business as

mission, environmental stewardship and for the first time, advocacy and poverty, a track sponsored by World Vision, the International Justice Mission and Sojourners International.

“Young people are thinking more globally and have a passion for justice issues,” says Heather Sells, a reporter for CBN News who attended Urbana to shoot a feature story on what she calls “the justice generation.”

Keynote speaker Ramez Atallah, who is the general secretary of the Bible Society of Egypt and chair of the program committee for Luusanne 2010 in South Africa, challenged attendees to embrace and build upon a rich heritage of evangelical leaders such as Bible teacher John Stott but to avoid past mistakes of Christians who sometimes transformed money into a goal rather than a means to communicate the gospel. “When that happens, what becomes of the universal character of the church?” he asked.

Reconciliation leader John Perkins applauded the conference’s recognition of justice issues as a major call in a Christian’s life, noting that when he and Evangelicals for Social Action President Ron Sider spoke at Urbana in 1982, their voices were in the minority.

“This is a post-racist generation that is ready and able to take the gospel further than any one of us has before,” said

Perkins, who led a leadership workshop with Shane Claiborne, co-author with Perkins of *Follow Me to Freedom*, and spoke to participants in the advocacy and poverty track.

Oscar Muriu, senior pastor of Nairobi Chapel in Nairobi, Kenya, talked about a shift in missions that will mobilize more believers from Asia, South America and Africa. For centuries, Muriu observed, most missionaries came from European and North American nations and ministered in Third World Asian, South American and African locales. Now, with the church growing in these places, communication technologies advancing and European and American culture becoming more secular, the dynamics have changed, Muriu said.

“Is there a tipping point to a new model to do missions?” he asked. “The tipping point may not happen for 20 years, but we do not need to hurry, the shift has happened.”

What will the new model look like? “For 200 years missions was driven by a money model,” Muriu observed. “In Africa, we just don’t have the resources. In Asia, they don’t have the resources. In Latin America, they don’t have the same resources. We can go into communities of need with nothing and depend on God and their hospitality, but we cannot go in fully funded. So we need to move from a money-driven model of missions to an incarnational model.”

The booth for ministries such as Word Made Flesh and InnerCHANGE-groups that place workers to live among the poor in some of the world's neediest places-were busy with inquiries. "Be the generation that rises up to do missions like Jesus did, truly dwelling among the people we are called to serve," Muriu said.

Attendee Cody Nielsen of Santa Ana, Calif., said he was inspired to do something in his community. "Now I need to muster up the courage and resolve to actually start a Bible study or find a way to express God's justice," said the 17-year-old.

"I am learning about different cultures and how to apply biblical missions in my life right now," said Jessica Schweim, 20, a nursing student at the College of the Ozarks in Missouri. "It is our job as Christians to pray for passion and then go out and be His hands and feet no matter where that takes us."

Although overall attendance is down from the 20,000 who came to the last Urbana in 2006, more students attended this year's conference, Govier said. The crowd crossed denominational lines and included some charismatics, he added. A group of students from Christian Assembly in Eagle Rock, Calif., drove across country to attend, and on the last night, Pentecostal speaker and writer Brenda Salter McNeil was the featured speaker.

Salter McNeil challenged attendees to be

credible witnesses of Christ and His transforming power. "We must be willing to go outside our comfort zones to places where our knowledge, education, jokes, manners and skills do not work, to places that people need us just to show up and be authentic," she said.

"This call to engage the world is more than just a social presence," she added. "It is more than fishes and loaves or building a house. We must do that, but we cannot do it in our own strength. This is a spiritual practice. It is allowing God to break into our human affairs. Good works and social justice must be accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit."