

August 2010

RISE people

Speaking to the Soul



Niki Vasilakis is regarded as one of the most exciting violinists to have emerged from Australia in recent years. In the lead up to her appearance at the LifeWell conference she talks to RISE about music, faith and restoration.

Niki grew up in a very safe, loving Christian environment, with a strong and real faith and relationship with God

from a very young age. In her teenage years and young adult life she experienced many things that challenged her faith and admits there were a lot of different influences on her. "Without going into detail, there were times during those years where I experienced great restoration in my relationship with God. For me this restoration came from the awakening of God's grace in my own life. As time goes by I find I am constantly being restored by God, turning from my selfish, sinful nature, my brokenness. As I walk through this life, God restores me day by day."

Niki stresses that her faith influences her entire life, including her career. "I can't compartmentalise my career with my spiritual life. Playing music is such a big part of how I express myself that, career or not, it is influenced by my faith. As far as the personal decisions I have made regarding my career, there have been many, many forks in the road where the 'right' path to take in my career has not been the 'right' path that I have felt God has been leading me to take and I have had to make some hard decisions and say no to a lot of things. I have reflected a lot on the fact that I feel 'called by God' to play music for him and it has been confusing at times as to what that is supposed to look like - as what I do in the Classical music field sometimes can seem so far removed from anything spiritual. I have come to realise that everything is spiritual and God has me in my industry for a reason.

"I am really blessed to play music for a career, I love what I get to do every day, but the reason I feel so blessed is because I know how powerful music can be in restoring people's hearts, souls, lives. How music can bring people into an awareness of God's presence like nothing else. I know in my own life music has a way of speaking to the soul that sometimes words cannot and it amazes me how God speaks through that. I am

lucky to be able to participate in such a thing and see people's lives change by lines on a page, steel strings and horse hair. God works through mysterious ways!"

Many of us find that following God's calling on our lives is not always easy - even those like Niki who experience great success in their field. "There is quite a lot of hostility towards religion amongst many of the artistic people who I have come to know. I often feel quite alone at times, with touring and many, many nights away from my loved ones and support. But I know that it is a privilege to meet so many amazing, interesting, spiritual people who may never get to know a real Christ follower. I hope that I may have some effect, as minuscule or large as it may be, at showing them what Jesus means to me."

Apart from Niki's faith, her family is the most important thing to her - her husband, her baby that's on the way and her family. She recognises that without their support she could not do what she does, or be who she is. "I really try to enjoy life, enjoy the great moments that happen. It's way too easy for me to over-think things, get overwhelmed and be anxious about everything so I make a real effort to enjoy life - as simple as it sounds. I like to do something each day that brings pleasure, drinking tea out of a beautiful cup, walking the dog, watching a comedy."

When asked what she would most like to achieve through her music, Niki says "The list is endless, ask anyone who knows me - but that list can be a little dangerous as it can so easily become about what I want to achieve in music rather than what God wants me to do. I have to constantly give this one over to God as I am naturally a very competitive person and I want to achieve great things. But the more I focus on achievements the further I feel away from God and the more it feels like I am swimming upstream.

"All I hope for now is to be able to continue to make music for many years to come, see more children have the opportunity to make and experience music and feel led by God each day in it."

Read more about Niki at www.selbyandfriends.com.au/2008/nvbio.html.

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RISE people

LifeWell Conference 2010

Keynote speakers at LifeWell Conference 2010 will be:



Mark Sayers – Speaker, author and expert on popular culture and faith, Mark is also founder of Über, a ministry that specializes in issues of youth and young adult discipleship. He is also the leader of the Red East church in Melbourne, Australia, an innovative Christian community specifically reaching the young adult demographic. See Mark's article "Dealing with your thorny bits" in this edition of RISE Online.



Sy Rogers – Regarded as a gifted international communicator, award-winning talk show host, recording artist and pastor, Sy has served for over two decades in ministry as a pastoral care specialist regarding sexuality and related concerns. Sy is making a return visit to Adelaide for this year's conference, due to popular demand.



Donna Crouch – As Executive Pastor of Hillsong CityCare, Donna oversees all of the church's community care. CityCare's objective is to help mobilise the church to make a practical difference to others - one life at a time. As a result of CityCare's ministry, each week thousands of people facing unemployment, addictions, hardship, or simply needing someone to talk to, receive help and support.

Keynote artists will be:



Cameron Semmens – Poet and performer, Cameron has published many books and CDs of his. He makes his living through words running workshops, performing and selling his books. He lives in Melbourne with his wife Sonya, who is also a writer, and his baby son Spencer who can't write a word. See Cameron's article 'Answers, Questions and Rampaging Elephants' and his poem 'A Herd of Elephants is in my Chest' in this edition of RISE Online.



Niki Vasilakis – Regarded as one of the most exciting violinists to have emerged from Australia in recent years, Niki commenced her violin studies in Adelaide at age 4. Her appearances on Australian television on programs such as the Nine Network's A Current Affair, Today Show, SBS 'Classical Destinations' and a busy international schedule of concerts and recording, have already made her name familiar to a wide public.

At the conclusion of the conference, Rev Dr John Beasy will lead through a time of anointing with oil.

August 2010

smart living

Dealing With Your Thorny Bits



Mark Sayers is an author and speaker who specialises in interpreting popular culture from a Christian viewpoint. Author of 'The Trouble with Paris', he will be bringing his expertise on popular culture and faith to LifeWell Conference 2010.

After Jesus, Paul is most definitely the main protagonist of the New Testament. Today we are still in awe of his leadership, his apostolic gifting and his pastoral insights. He was able to mix it with the

best of the Rabbis and to also converse and debate with the leading Hellenic thinkers. He planted churches, healed the sick, preached the gospel throughout the Roman world and generally created a magnificently holy ruckus where ever he went.

Yet in 2nd Corinthians he lets us in on an intriguing element of his life. Paul writes, "I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak then I am strong."

What I find fascinating is that here we have the central personality of the early Church, saying that his prayers to be released from his 'thorn in his flesh', were unanswered. We must ask where was his faith? Did he not believe that Jesus had come to offer us life in fullness? Paul's ongoing struggle with the 'thorn in his flesh' seems to be in direct contrast to the suffering-less version of the Christian life preached in many churches today.

Although many have speculated on what Paul's thorn could have been no one knows. I like this, I think that it means that we can all identify in our life a thorn. It could be anything. A temptation, a past hurt, a medical condition, a relational issue, an addiction, a character flaw. All of us live with thorns. Some of us will be miraculously healed from these thorns, but most of us like Paul will struggle with them for the rest of our lives. Therefore it is essential that we learn how to live with our thorns. Here are some pointers.

- Be Honest in identifying what your thorn or thorns are.
- Find someone who will keep you accountable in regards to your 'thorn/s'. Make sure that they are someone who will ask you the hard questions. Consider too that you might need to seek professional help.
- Understand your warning signs. Like a mechanic who can work out what is wrong with a car by simply listening to the engine. Get to know your engine and when things are moving into dangerous territory.
- Pray for healing or deliverance from your thorn. But if God does not take it away, make a decision to live victoriously with your thorn. A person who suffers from depression can live with that condition in a victorious or defeated state. Spend some time picturing what victory looks like for you with your thorn.
- Use your thorn as a gift to others. Note Paul says that he was given his thorn in order to stop him from being conceited. Paul's thorn made him a more humble, and gracious person. Thus his battle to live with his thorn became not just a ministry to himself but to others.
- Recognize that your battle with your thorn is the foundry for most of your spiritual growth. Your success in this struggle will be crucial not just to yourself in this life but those around you.
- Lastly beware the leader who is unaware of his or her thorns. The darkest moments in the life of the church are almost always caused by leaders who are either naive to or unwillingly to seriously confront the thorns in their lives. If you find yourself under a leader like this run away. I am not using hyperbole, seriously get the heck out of there.

This article was originally posted at www.marksayers.wordpress.com on 14 April 2010. Used with permission.

August 2010

smart living

Protect your sexuality



Dr Nick Hawkes is a radio presenter and Pastor of Rivergate Christian Community in South Australia.

All of us fall short of God's intended plan for us and mess up, particularly in the area of sexuality. This can result in destructive sexual addictions and phobias..

This is tragic, because God intends the very best for us with our sexuality. Sadly, abuse, pornography and poor role models mess it up for many of us.

If you are caught up with a sexual addiction and are falling short of God's best plan for you, know these seven things:

- 1) It is possible to change.
- 2) Know that God's plans for sex are good. Sex wasn't invented by some rock star with metal pointed breasts, it was invented by God.
- 3) Know yourself. Identify your issues and face them honestly.
- 4) Know that managing sexuality is challenging. This is normal.
- 5) Husbands, learn to develop an appetite for your wife. The ancient book of Proverbs advises a man to choose to:
 - Rejoice in your wife.
 - Be satisfied.
 - Be captivated by your wife's love (Proverbs 5:18-19).
- 6) Guard your eye gate. Be in charge of what you look at. Men are visually driven. Make boundaries for yourself so that you never buy pornography or watch Internet porn.
- 7) There is a point where sexual appetite crosses over to addiction. If this is the case, get help to get it under control. Talk to wise, trusted Christian friends or counsellors.

In other words, choose now to protect your sexuality. It is too special a thing to have destroyed by addiction.

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Inside Out

Answers, Questions and Rampaging Elephants



Cameron Semmens is a poet and performer. He will be bringing his unique brand of entertainment and insight to LifeWell Conference 2010.

Sure, Jesus is The Answer – but I just asked if there was any Vegemite!



We all know that Jesus is The Answer. But now we've left the safety of Sunday School, many of us have found ourselves asking questions about life and faith that are a bit more complex than they

used to be. It can make us wonder, if Jesus is the answer – then am I asking the wrong questions?

Yet right or wrong, the questions keep on coming.

As humans, we often seek nice, clear, black and white answers – it makes us feel secure and confident. But when childhood is replaced with a grown up world and its grown up dilemmas, we find there are some areas of life and faith where the answers aren't clear cut.

Thankfully, I think Jesus acknowledges this in the very style and substance of his life and words. Jesus didn't write the ultimate 'self-help' book: *How to Follow God in Three Simple Steps*. He didn't write evangelistic tracts. He didn't leave us text books. Instead he mostly lived out, rather than spelled out, his faith. And when he did use words, he told stories. Even in these parables, the meanings weren't always immediately clear. He wanted to provoke genuine engagement with the issues and with God, not brief head-nodding moments of box-ticking.

The Rev Tim Costello, CEO of World Vision Australia, captures some real truth when he says: "Jesus gave no ready answer to complex human dilemmas. In fact, he did the reverse... Jesus reminds us that we are at our most dangerous when we think we have the answers. Instead his extreme teaching raises a new moral sensitivity that leads us to listen to others and to God."

I have come to understand that there are many mysteries inherent within the Christian faith. That's why it's called faith, not fact. And thankfully, if God is really God, then he is far more than our petty human brains can ever comprehend. After all, if God wasn't partially incomprehensible – He wouldn't be God at all.

So I'd like to raise a glass to the asking of good questions.

One of the reasons I am a poet is because I find it more natural to ask questions than to give answers. I believe we must grill, probe, interrogate, wonder, marvel and hypothesize. And that the road to certainty is cobblestoned of question marks. But in this I'm not advocating the reckless surrendering to blind uncertainty – there is, after all, a difference between questioning to undermine and questioning to understand.

Instead, we should take a leaf out of the book of childhood again. Children learn by asking endless questions, and learning shouldn't end with childhood.

Let us never reach an age or a stage of life when we decide, 'This is how the world is' or worse, 'This is what God is like.' Our knowledge of the world, and especially God, should never be locked in – frozen – by our own life experiences or by an unexamined faith in the concrete of conservatism. For if they remain concrete and unexamined, these beliefs become thin, worn and fragile. Life will always challenge what we believe it to be, and God will certainly not always behave as we expect Him to.

Our perception of God, our world, ourselves and our place in it must be continually re-evaluated for them to grow and mature.

This can be confronting. Particularly for the church, which has traditionally and historically been the dispenser of answers. It's only natural we have a sense of trepidation when faced with tough questions of faith, or doubt. We all have a natural fear of the unknown – and as Christians, we carve faith out of the unprovable.

As it says in Timothy, 'Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great...'

As long as we're living with this mystery, some questions will not go away. In fact, as long as our world and our society keeps changing, there are some questions that we'll need to keep asking. At times though, the answers will be so vast and complex that one question is simply not big enough to ask

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Inside Out

Answers, Questions and Rampaging Elephants (continued)

them. And we must ultimately concede that there are some questions that will never be answered. Not in this life at least.

And that's where, I believe, poetry can play its part. Capturing those wispy, nebulous questions that duck and weave, and refuse to be certainties. Thus, I'll leave you with a poem – about learning to live with the many mysteries of life and of God. It's not always easy, but I truly believe that where answers end, there is mystery. And God can be found in mystery.

A HERD OF ELEPHANTS IS IN MY CHEST

I've always had questions in me – big questions.
They stomp around my chest – a herd of elephants.
Not full-sized elephants, these elephants are little,
but they're still heavy, and a bit scary.

Sometime in my late teens they broke out.
Prised my rib cage open,
barged their way out between my bent-back bones.
And off they went out into the big wide world:
grazing philosophical savannas,
exploring theological jungles,
and crashing through the endless mass-media scrub.

I never bent my ribs back into place.
Friends told me to get surgery,
to stitch up the gaping wound in my chest.
But it wasn't a wound to me – it was an opening.

And then, slowly, they started to come home.
Not all of them, some found what they wanted out there,
it was mostly the big elephants that came back:
the muddied ones, the untameable ones,
the ones in the room that no-one mentions –
thump by thump they lumbered back in through my aching chest.

These days, they come and they go,
sometimes with gentle pushes,
other times with crushing shoves.
They're noticeably active during dark, dark nights
and long seasons of dryness.

I've found the only way to live with elephants
blundering around my heart is to give them space:
let them go if they need to,
let them sit if they have to.

I used to hear the beat of fear in their thumping and
trumpeting
but now, I hear the melody of curiosity,
now, their insistent stomping and stamping
is an anthem to the country of my being.

See more of Cameron Semmens at www.webcameron.com

August 2010

Spotlight on the Nations

God does not punish the poor



Six months have now gone by since the terrible earthquake in Haiti when an estimated 230,000 people died and more than 1 million (about the population of Adelaide) were left homeless. We may

have donated to their cause, but by and large I suspect they have almost totally faded from our minds. The people of Haiti continue to re-build their lives and their future, and as they do, it may be worth reflecting again on our response to their plight, and others like them. This article was written by Canon Ray Cleary of Anglicare Victoria back in January. It is re-printed with permission.

There are occasions when I am embarrassed by the utterances of some Christian leaders, who describe themselves as evangelical and who ascribe events such as the earthquake in Haiti recently as self inflicted. One Northern Irish Minister attributed the earthquake to the practice of voodoo, and Pat Robertson, prominent US evangelical, expressed similar sentiments. I find such comments scandalous and an abomination bearing little relationship to my reading of scripture while acknowledging many others who claim a similar expression of Christianity would want to distance themselves from such statements.

There is no doubt that the recent tragedy in Haiti raises the perennial question about the absence of God and the presence of suffering in the world and how a supposedly loving God permits or allows such suffering to be inflicted on his people. Words of any sort whether they be of consolation, compassion and encouragement fall far short of any explanation that can take away the immense suffering experienced by the people of Haiti and even I suggest those with faith are troubled by such events, while those of no faith challenged by the tragedy may simply view it as the "luck of the draw", or a chance accident. To suggest the earthquake is in any way part of God's plan and doing is to say that God takes pleasure and revenge on the poorest and most vulnerable in our community. The laments of the prophets of the Old Testament and their calls for justice, the Sermon on the Mount and the parables and the New Testament accounts of the ministry of Jesus challenge such views.

The events in Haiti make many of our concerns here at home pale into insignificance and while I look at the pictures emerging from one of the poorest nations of the earth, of collapsed housing, schools, hospitals and the anxiety and fear on the faces of those clambering for aid and shelter, I am reminded of the fact that for over one billion of the world's population their life experiences are present every day, and I want to categorically say that in all these events my God suffers alongside and with those affected. At the same time the challenge to all of us and particularly from the developed and developing world, is to work harder to distribute the bounty of the creation to the poorest parts of the globe and to continue to offer hope by words of encouragement and acts of goodwill. Belief in the Christian God calls and inspires people of faith to stand with and alongside those who suffer, to restore and offer hope in both word and deed and to embrace God's generosity for others in their time of need.

Canon Ray Cleary
Chief Executive Officer
Anglicare Victoria
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