

Episode 136 A Visit to Tyndale House

Peter Williams

Hi, my name's Peter Williams. I'm a biblical scholar and I have the privilege of being the Principal and CEO of Tyndale House Center for Biblical Research in Cambridge, England.

David Capes

Dr. Peter Williams, Peter, good to see you here. Good to be with you in your place this time. It's my first time to Tyndale house. It's an amazing facility. It's got a great history.

Peter Williams

So, actually we go back to the time of the Second World War. And it's really interesting that Tyndale House began in 1944, as a center for Bible research, before D-Day and the Normandy landings. So, people were thinking ahead about how we have a center which will foster Bible scholarship in service of the church.

David Capes

And so, since 1944, a lot of great scholars have come through here, and have fellowshiped here, and you've got a wonderful library that has a great history. You've got accommodations for people as well. One of the things you're working on these days is an initiative for international scholars, which I'm excited about. Tell us a little bit about it.

Peter Williams

Well, what we find is that Bible resources aren't equally spread around the world. There are plenty of places where people don't have access to a really good library, or the opportunity to spend extended time studying the Scriptures at a high level. And so, we like to bring people in from around the world. So we've had up to 10 in from Cuba, and they are studying biblical languages really intensively before going back to their own context. Of course, their life in Cuba can be quite hard. You're trying to feed your family on not very much money. And if you're a pastor there, you're not going to get much extended time to study because people are going to be knocking on your door all the time and needing you to do things. And so, people actually need to come out of that for a while to study. We've also had someone come from Egypt, and it's a different setting there. He's looking to plant churches and lead a seminary there, and we're able to get behind him. And he's able to get the experience of working academically at a very high level, because we're next to one of the world's leading universities. And you have the elite context here, but the Christian support and mission mindedness that you have in a Christian community.

David Capes

So, when you think about where you've been in the past, you mainly served North American European scholars. But now the center of gravity of the Christian movement has moved to the global south. And that brings a lot of challenges, because most of the seminaries and most of the resources are in Europe

and North America. So now we have the challenge of getting great resources and people to those locations.

Peter Williams

Yes. And I see it as a challenge and an opportunity. In Africa, the average age [of a church member] is 10 years younger than the average age in Europe. But the church is also growing, that's a great opportunity, because you have youth on the side of the church. And it is also a great stretch, because you have a lot of poverty, as you have a young population. And you have a growing church without necessarily having the leaders and that existed in the Western Church in the past. So, lots and lots of zeal, lots of commitment which we often lack. And there's a need for working in partnership across the global church. It's not one part of the church telling another part what to do, but really to work internationally in partnership and say how can we bring what God has resourced us with together? So, if one part of the world has been given youth, and another part has been given libraries and a certain intellectual heritage of thought leadership, can those two come together? I spent 10 days last year in Brazil, and specifically looking to find scholars for the future. Their churches are growing so fast, that they can't train pastors fast enough. And so you also need people who are going to train the pastors and train the people who are going to be leading in the seminaries. And so, there's a huge work to do in many different countries, where we need more people who are really well trained. Everyone across the world understands training a doctor takes many, many years. And so just about every society where you have trained doctors, those trained doctors have spent many, many years training. That's not the case when it comes to theological education, people are not resourced as well. And the church does need to step in there.

David Capes

In the past, some might say all you need is the spirit. That's the way it's sometimes understood. Well, in fact, you need to renew and grow the mind. You need deepen the faith. And that comes through the process of education.

Peter Williams

Yes, so certainly, we've been thinking about how we connect ourselves as an institution with more and more different places. So yes, we bring a certain amount of people who can come here and spend a good sabbatical time, learning alongside other people. Often, they've studied at a very high level studying ancient languages and are able to read manuscripts. But we have so much to learn from parts of the persecuted church. *They can often understand the Bible better than we can, because it's not understood out of books.* They've got experiences, which give more insight than books might. And so, that's where I think it really is about bringing people together. And it's a delight just having people from different parts of the world all together. And they make a network that exists even after people leave here.

David Capes

And those friendships last a long time. My doctor father, Earl Ellis, spoke about this place so glowingly over the years because of the connections that he made and the mission of Tyndale House. And to some degree, I think it's inspired us in Houston to think about having a residential theological library there. It's only 5000 miles away. So that's why we've made it possible for so many good scholars to

come our way. And we look forward to the time that you come back. If somebody comes to Tyndale House and are ready to do some work, are they affiliated with any of the colleges [at Cambridge]? Are they working on a degree themselves? Are they taking courses here at Tyndale house? How does that work?

Peter Williams

We have a whole mixture of different ways of working. *We are a residential research library, and a worshipping community.* So, someone could do a PhD in Cambridge University. And so, they're registered with Cambridge University, that's where their qualification comes from. But they might be physically in our space for three years, they might have a family and live in our space. They're part of our community. Every day, they're spending time with us. And they have the chance of having fellowship and being shaped that way. And yet, at the same time, their education is from an elite university. The piece of paper they'll come away with at the end says Cambridge University. We don't give out degrees. And one of the nice things about not giving out degrees ourselves is we're not in a rival relationship with any institution. It doesn't matter where it is in the world. People can do their degree and any place, and spend some of their time with us. And we're not trying to poach them. Someone could be doing a PhD at a university in Houston and spend a month with us or. And so that's a great thing. We're here to be cheerleaders. Sometimes people have quite a lonely path to scholarship. It's often very difficult. You have to make financial sacrifices, often to pursue further studies. It can be lonely, because not many people understand you. And the more you learn about one thing, the fewer people you can talk to about it at all.

David Capes

Yes, [when you're working on detailed scholarship], only a small number of people have a really strong interest in what you're doing sometimes.

Peter Williams

Yes. So then being able to take people on that journey is important. We have a coffee time every day at 11. And we have chapel time. We often have cake to celebrate some event. And there's a community together because a lot of the people in the library can be quite introverted. But when they get amongst themselves, they're able to open up. There isn't too much one upmanship here, because everyone knows that everyone else in the room is smart. And so that actually helps people be a bit more down to earth. They are more honest and open. I think is a really nice thing coming across people who genuinely are brilliant at what they do; that they can be the top in the world at what they do. And yet they don't see that as too big a thing. I mean, everyone's made uniquely by God, and they're uniquely valuable. And if they're alive, they have work that they can do for God. And that's a great thing.

David Capes

One of the things you said is this is a worshipping, committed community. Tell us more about that, because the residents here come from all over the world, they come from a lot of different worship styles.

Peter Williams

Yeah, so we have chapel and that tends to be led by the staff of the institution. And then we have prayers of a more informal kind. And that's led by the Readers. And, they've got two slightly different styles. And, we have an open-door policy. People from different persuasions can come through. We find most people are Christ centered, wanting to serve the church, but we also have other people come in, and we want them to join in the community. In Chapel we're not trying to communicate new information to people, because they've got plenty of information. We're trying to stir their hearts, stir their affections for Christ, and help them think through what it means for them. Scholars have quite a lot of learning to use that God given geekiness, that God given ability to serve Christ. And so, that's particularly where we focus a lot of our teaching. What's it like in the academy. What are the dangers to our hearts of knowledge or of opposition, or what we're doing? Those are the sorts of things we want to challenge people on.

David Capes

What are the challenges that people from Africa, or Asia, are facing when they go back home? Because inevitably, they go back home to their churches and organizations?

Peter Williams

Well, there can be all sorts of challenges. I'm thinking of a man from Madagascar. People in his diocese, in the previous year or two had died of starvation. So, we're actually talking about the deepest and most obvious material needs that he was dealing with, when he goes back to the seminary he leads. He's got to make sure all of the students are fed. The seminary can't charge any fees, because the students don't have any money. We have various people from Ethiopia, they might be come from Addis Ababa, and there are quite a few theological colleges there. And they are more looking for book resources that they might not have access to. Or the extended study time and the interaction with ideas from outside their own settings. We have some from mainland China here. Obviously, they can get more academic freedom here and they don't have many generations of Christian theological reflection in the Chinese language. So, the needs can vary a lot.

David Capes

You talked earlier about persecution. I taught a course this past summer in South Africa. And one of the students that I had was going to be going back to Sudan. And there were all sorts of ramifications to the possibilities faced there. Do you find people reticent to go back home because of the problem of persecution?

Peter Williams

We do have people who come from very close to war zones such as the Democratic Republic of Congo. The life that they're living here is a temporary reprieve from the insecurity they have back home. We also have people who can come from settings where it's hard to be a Christian openly. It's less easy to talk about it.

David Capes

You said some of the majority world scholars that come here have a greater sense of what Scripture is about [because of their experiences]. We forget that the scriptures are written to people who would be persecuted in their lifetimes. And, a lot of the Bible is written against the background of persecution.

Peter Williams

Yeah. So, it can happen with persecution, and also other difficulties. I go back again to my friend who lives in southern Madagascar and will go to preach and take the gospel to a new village. It might be five days of walking. And you literally walk until it's the evening, and you come across a village, and you ask for hospitality. You have rice in your backpack to share with them. And people give you hospitality, these are not necessarily Christians, but just people who welcome you into the house. And it struck me how close this was to what we're seeing with Jesus sending out his disciples and saying, go to the place where they welcome you. And he is a man who lived that, and I had the privilege of talking to him, firsthand. And I was learning from him. And how extraordinary that is. So, it's very humbling to read the Scriptures with people who just see so many different things because of their cultural angle. And you realize, I'm missing out a lot, just by sitting in the western world reading books. There is so much more to see. And I need my brothers and sisters to help me with that.

David Capes

If anybody's interested in knowing more about Tyndale house, how would they do that?

Peter Williams

Go to tyndalehouse.com. That's our website. And you should have resources there. There's a newsletter and free magazine. We've got a journal and podcasts, so plenty to find out.

David Capes

And if people are deeply interested in your international student initiative, is that information on there as well?

Peter Williams

Yeah, so you can find the information is mainly written for people who might be coming, and you can look on how to book a visit. But if anyone wants to find out more they can write to us and we're happy to share. We've also got to an American 501 C 3 status through which people can support the work and donations are welcomed.

David Capes

That's always helpful. Dr. Peter Williams, thank you for being with us today on the Stone Chapel. Standby for a nugget of wisdom from Dr. Peter Williams.

Peter Williams

I've been studying the words of Jesus and he is simply the most amazing reader of Scripture. If you want to understand the Old Testament, you need to look carefully at the words of Jesus and the way he teaches us to submit our lives to God's word. And I just say, I read the gospels again and again, reading the Old Testament, and it's such a delight to see what he sees in the scriptures.