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An Interview with John Ling

Dr John Ling is a teacher of Chemistry and Physics at Kent College, Canterbury. He has recently taken over from Mike Poole as the CiS Education Secretary.

Tell us what you've been doing until now.

I started off by studying Materials Science at Surrey University (I liked the small and friendly department), followed by a PGCE in Chemistry at Hughes Hall, Cambridge, with subsidiaries in science and selected sports. After some time as a house tutor, sports coach and chemistry teacher at Christ's Hospital, Horsham, I became a company director of my family firm, (engineering and commercial property). This led to a PhD in Surface Chemistry/Properties of polymer films at Nottingham University. After this I became research Manager at British Steel, South Wales. I was transferred and promoted to Corus Group R&D HQ after a company merger. Here I became secretary of UK small project innovation and principal researcher for organic coatings, particularly, but not exclusively for strip steel. I'm currently a Chemistry and Physics teacher at Kent College, Canterbury.

What do you do for fun?

I'm a very keen cricketer, I enjoy most sports, and family outings. When the dynamics are right, teaching is very enjoyable.

Favourite luxury?

My wife (and family) will confirm I have a weakness for a well-made trifle!

Who have been the most important role models in your life?

An understanding of Jesus Christ's life and teaching is so important. My parents have been very positive role models to me. My father was for a while a Methodist minister and his political realism and my mother's sensitivity and tact have witnessed much to me about Christian values (as well as providing theological insights and reading material!). Another important role model has been Michael Hepworth, my former RE teacher and now retired Headmaster of Birkdale School Sheffield. There are many more, some may be reading this article, so thank you!

What challenges have you come across as a Christian and a scientist?

One of the major challenges that I have had to face has been in the industrial work place. During the fairly recent and massive redundancies within Corus Group Plc, I was appalled by some aspects of personnel and general management, Health and Safety, strategic decision-making and a sense of company paralysis. I sought and made some progress in developing a career that would enable me to address some of these issues. However when my career path became blocked and increasing levels of ossification appeared to be taking hold as the share price plunged towards 3 pence, I overtly stated my concerns and resigned my post. This was a very difficult path to walk.

How has your faith helped you as a scientist, or vice versa?

The Christian faith emphasises God's grace and redemptive purposes. When everything around you appears wild and uncontrolled, to know, by Faith in Jesus Christ, that your personhood is the concern of a loving, creator God is a source of great encouragement and a strong director towards social justice.

What science-faith book have you most enjoyed/found most helpful?

I have found theological and pastoral books most useful. I have particularly valued authors such as Paul Tournier and Jean Vanier, perhaps because I view that the exploration of science is greatly informed by the relational as well as propositional aspects of the human experience. I have also enjoyed reading Paul Tillich and Leslie Newbigin, whose far ranging appreciation of the implications of the Gospel is refreshing.

What question would keep you debating till four in the morning?

I would see it as an indication of a badly planned meeting if I was still up at four in the morning... social and political governance, particularly the relationship between the powerless and the powerful.

If you weren't a scientist what would you be?

A journalist/politician.

How do you see your role as Education Secretary developing?

I am very excited about taking up this role. Over the last 6 months I have met a number of educationalists involved at the interface of science and education as a preparation.

At some point it would be good to see a conference addressing educational issues particularly exploring social, science and technology policy issues. CiS members, I believe, offer a wealth of experience and knowledge in these areas. I feel we have a responsibility to equip new generations of Christian scientists to be able to engage with the governance of future technological capabilities and social issues.

Over the period of my tenure I aim to:

- Keep up with national reforms (England and Wales mainly) in primary and secondary education.
- Highlight (in PréCiS and on website) issues that relate to Faith/science dialogue and Science education generally.
- From a Christian perspective, highlight examples of good practice in education.
- Establish links with groups with similar perspectives.
- Encourage and support Christian scientists involved in education.
- Provide and disseminate materials about conferences and resource materials.
- Maintain a broad and international focus, albeit from a UK base.
- Raise issues for discussion and prayer.