

ASCM National Conference 2011 – The Revolution of Small: Freed from Success
Report by Ann Ng

- ❖ *god comes to us in the weak, poor, broken, small ... god comes to us in our own brokenness*
- ❖ *for freedom you have been set free, stand firm then, and do not return to enslaved living*
Galatians 5:1

It's only been 20 years or more since I attended an SCM conference but National Conference 2011 in Perth organized by the WA SCMerS was like 'coming home'. There was the same exploration of faith issues, intellectual rigour, lots of discussion and information sharing, fellowship, good food and a slowly growing, binding sense of something good happening.

Conference was a 3-day affair, starting Sunday afternoon and finishing Wednesday. In all, we were a small community, quite wide-ranging in age and interests of course, but asking similar questions – where to, what for in regards to the ASCM, what role does Christianity have to play in our lives, is God really to be found in 'weakness', 'boy, did you find it cold last night?' and occasionally 'what's for dinner?'

Clare and Tyson Menck, Barrie Baker and Kate Watts had done an incredible amount of ground work such that the conference ran very smoothly. Clare led a series of challenging and engaging bible studies each morning, and Ros Hewett, another WA SCMer led the worships (which included 'washing of one another's feet one morning, and walking meditatively in a labyrinth on an adjacent property another morning). During the day and in the evenings on this beautiful property called "Gidgegannup" kindly lent to us for our use by a WA church minister called Neville Watson (perhaps better known for his book, "Traffic light: an on-site account of the 2003 Iraq War as seen through the journal of Neville Watson") we sat and thought and worked and breathed through sessions led by different individuals helping us to ponder on questions to do with "The Revolution of Small – Freed from Success".

Little Eva wandered amongst us, reminding us in no uncertain terms of 'smallness' but at the same time with a full personality of her own, but needing care and attention from those of us bigger and more able and independent than her.

Clare and Tyson's fellow-parishioner, Michael Prince led the first session. He was a rope-in but it made little difference. In line with the topic of "Freed from Success" he shared with us different articles on concepts like success and earnestness, giving us lots of room to explore the usual definitions as presented in worldly terms, and allowing us to question if these were parallel yardsticks to those set by God.

Another day, Barrie Baker talked about God's economy in nature and contrasted this with our modern human economy in our web of life, asking questions about our culture of excess. Was Jesus a minimalist? Is it impossible to distinguish any more between wants and needs? Involvement with others inevitably brings compromise. We rated where we were on the level of waste production, and tried to

work out some practical steps that a responsible society could take towards tackling this Culture of Excess.

One night had all of us learning to crochet from WA SCMer, Megan Sheard, who talked about returning to a lifestyle of working as an artisan (crochet teacher and sales via the Net and through friends). Megan shared ideas from Ivan Illich's writings on how tools have been used not to serve us but instead to oppress us. A few delightful photos of the young men learning to crochet and succeeding brought the evening to a close.

Jeni Goring, Anglican priest, talked about how in working with people who have undergone severe loss or trauma, it is important that we ourselves understand our own interpretations of why calamity has occurred – is God to blame, or the devil, or is it just a case of 'shit happens'? So often in our lives, God equates to 'power, omni-this and omni-that, eternity, strength, etc' and weakness equates to 'small, powerless, voiceless, weak, ill, infirm, old, useless' and it would appear that never the twain shall meet, and yet we know deep inside that this is far from the truth.

One other Clare-led session looked at all the difficult questions raised with parent support when children were removed from their families, and Kate ran a very revealing simulation game on refugees fleeing and the things we would bring with us and what would be left by the end of our journeys.

On the last evening, Josh Peppall from World Vision spoke to us about his work in initially Bosnia, then Iraq, then Sri Lanka and currently Cambodia. From genocide issues to war refugees to the massacre in Sri Lanka of 40,000 people after truce had been declared, to human trafficking, Josh painted a graphic picture of a world with a lot of suffering and the work of the NGO sector but at the same time his optimism and faith shone through all that he had to say.

Queensland SCM sent Georgia, who had a wealth of knowledge in church history, Eloise was able to bring herself from Canberra partly because her fare to the US for studies wasn't as expensive as anticipated, I came from Victoria along with Pierre (student representative from Victoria University SCM) and he was able to tell everyone about what the students at VU had been doing the two years before on their campus, and WA SCM had along with its stalwart 'crew' some young students from the Performing Arts Departments of WA Universities.

On Tuesday afternoon, we also had the pleasure of a visit from two senior friends, and being able to connect a little with the past. Alan Mathews and his wife joined us soon after lunch and stayed for Jeni Goring's session as well.

It was a 'quality' conference, boundless thanks to the WA SCMer who brought it altogether, and to God who despite our smallness and weakness, gave us enough to recognise the fellowship amongst us and to try to do Her work.