

**Address on:- “A Century of Influence” by Renate Howe
7/10/09 by Calvin Rose**

I would like to thank Ray Barraclough and Peter Fensham for this opportunity to reflect on Renate Howe’s recent history of the ASCM.

I am not a historian or a theologian. So I trust you will forgive me if I rely somewhat on my own experience of the SCM.

I am most grateful to Renate Howe for her painstakingly researched study: “A Century of Influence”. It has provided me with a much fuller and richer understanding of my personal experience of the SCM, which, as I will briefly explain, provided the basis of my life as a Christian.

I grew up in a traditional Sydney evangelical context, with no critical understanding of the Bible. Understandably, it followed that on meeting the many challenges of Science in Secondary School and University, I encountered problems in belief – which I resolved by rejecting Christianity as implausible. In the third year of a Science and Engineering program at Sydney University I saw an SCM notice saying that a Professor Charles Birch would be giving a talk on “Science and Christianity”. A Science Professor talking on this – that sounded interesting. So I went to his talk, and there he addressed and seemed to blow away all the problems I had which appeared to make Science incompatible with Christianity as I understood it !

So I allowed myself to again embrace a faith I had felt forced to deny – and I fell into the warmth of the fellowship that was the Student Christian Movement, with women like Leila Giles playing leadership roles.

For the first time at Uni I was talking with students from all the different Faculties with which I had absolutely no contact, and joined in a weekly discussion group with Charles Birch sitting on the grass. We talked about Christianity, philosophy, theology, science, the war and its aftermath with returned servicemen, the needs of the world and the World Student Christian Federation. I experienced a National Conference with the indomitable if wearied Frank Engel. For me, the SCM really was a “University within a University”. I think it was Leila who introduced me to Margaret Holmes, about whom I knew nothing- but I now better understand the sense of awe and reverence in Leila’s voice as she introduced me to this grey-haired lady with twinkly eyes.

After graduating in Science and Aeronautical Engineering I went to work with the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation. in Melbourne, where I had some contact with the Senior Branch. After a couple of years in aircraft design I heard at the local church from a CMS missionary of the existence of a University in Uganda which drew students from all over East Africa. This information went off like a light bulb in my head, though I believe it was also the wider appreciation of the rest of the world, and of other life values one absorbed from the SCM experience that supported my decision to apply for a position in this University of East Africa, Makerere College, located in Kampala, Uganda. The letter offering me an Associate Lectureship position in Physics arrived on the night my wife Mavis and I announced our engagement, and the ship journey in 1954 to Uganda was an extended honeymoon.

Of the many Ugandan experiences, the irrelevance and harm of the un-necessary denominational differences stand out.

So for me the SCM experience was liberating, exciting and life changing. And “A Century of Influence” will tell you of

many such influences, not only in individuals, but in politics, in Australia's relationships with its neighbouring countries, and on its understanding of social responsibilities for the poor, immigrants, refugees and our indigenous peoples. Renate's book also describes how the ecumenical movement, and the World Council of Churches in particular was "the SCM grown up". This close linkage in personnel would seem to indicate some linkage in the later loss of confidence and support for the World Council and the SCM.

The student rebellions of the late 1960's in so many countries had an impact on the SCM and the WSCF. This upheaval in Universities was also a motivating factor in the decision of the Interim Council planning the new Griffith University in 1969/70 to include what were at the time radically new areas of study. These included Modern Asian Studies and Environmental Studies- which I had the great opportunity to help initiate as first Dean.

As Renate's book illustrates, the post-second World War period was one of rapid social change. The Universities opened up from a restricted sub-set of society to become a mass market of students from a whole range of countries seeking a qualification, and, especially beyond the Whitlam era, having to work part time to fund themselves. Whilst Senior Branch members were often involved in addressing the world's problems, their financial support and attempts at encouragement of the student SCM was not always as welcome as leadership which previously came from younger University staff members- such as Charles Birch I mentioned. Though student SCM support for social justice was strong, it was often somewhat submerged by the enthusiasms of more radical groups. In seeking to relate Christian faith to world issues, it is possible that the ASCM did not adequately digest some of the more radical theological explorations, and this seemed to sap its spiritual basis.

A time of rapid change is often fraught with tensions and anxieties. Although it may be said that the student SCM did not respond adequately to the challenges of a changing University world, there remains the strong vision of maintaining an intelligent and modestly radical response to the faith needs of a rapidly changing multicultural society. How vital is this need in a time of global warming and dwindling world ecological resources.

Renate's book shows the SCM and World Council of Churches as slowly but positively providing leadership in allowing the developing role of women as Christian leaders. However this was not without tensions, and as Mavis's historical work has shown, striving to change attitudes concerning the ordination of Anglican women has, and still does involve suffering, especially in a Diocese which shall remain nameless.

In conclusion may I say that Renate's book is more than a history of SCM over the past 100 years. The analysis illuminates historical themes which must be recognised and continually re-examined and developed to meet future needs. So go to Renate's book and discover the history of these foundations, and let us use them in envisaging possible implications for the future of the SCM, and, I believe, the Church as a whole.