

Book Launch

Robin Boyd, *The Witness of the Student Christian Movement: Church Ahead of the Church*

Memories from the Forest Floor:
SCM and WSCF after the earthquake, fire and flood.

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It is a great privilege to be invited to offer these personal reflections at the launch of Robin Boyd's book on the witness of the SCM. Robin's book is especially valuable as it seeks to understand and put into context some of the upheavals in the long history of the movement.

When I joined the SCM at the ANU in 1974, I was seventeen, had moved away from my family in Toowoomba, knew no-one at the university and had never heard of the SCM. The SCM had a "meet and greet" wine and cheese in Orientation Week. I went along, was made welcome and then next week was invited to a Bible Study. The SCM group was small but I was impressed by their openness, intelligence and enquiring minds. As a young science student, I was full of questions about God, faith, reason, caring for people and the earth. SCM addressed these questions in a way my formal university education did not.

As a new comer, I knew very little about the SCM beyond that small groups of friends on campus. But as my involvement grew, I learnt that it is an old movement dating back to 1896 here in Australia and has member movements around the world through the World Student Christian Federation. I also learnt that periods in its history reverberated in its memory. One was the split between SCM and the Evangelical Union in the 1920's and the second was the student political upheavals in the 1960's. These were, if you like, the earthquake and the bushfire, in the institutional memory of SCM. Later, when I became involved with WSCF, there was a third event, a flood, to add: the decentralization of the work from Geneva around regional nodes. This coincided with a period of decolonisation in world affairs. At the WSCF Assembly in Colombo in 1977, I remember being intrigued that regionalization which had happened a whole four or five years earlier was consuming so much energy and interest. Five years seemed a long time for a then 20 year old!

Looking back now, my experience of SCM and WSCF over the last 33 years has been one of living with the struggling green shoots in a forest that has known earthquake, fire and flood. I had no direct experience of those upheavals but I have shared the pain and joy of regeneration.

As a student in the mid 1970's, I found my spiritual, intellectual, political and social formation aided by the old tall trees, the senior friends, who stood by us. My memories are of creative worship, critical Bible study, living in SCM community households, engaging with social issues- environmental, nuclear, feminist, humanitarian- , national conferences, one held jointly with Catholic students, working with university chaplains, sitting on Australian Council of Churches committees. The

campus was a place of many Christian groups and we tried to build cooperative links with some of them, especially the Neumann Society and the EU.

From the late 1970's to the mid 1980's, as a national staff and national chairperson, I remember trying to encourage growth in the forest. Visiting campuses around the country, allocating resources to branch workers, putting out a national magazine, *Across the Currents*, talking to churches, going to chaplains' conferences, organising meetings with the national leadership of other student Christian groups, looking for resources.

One of the historical ramifications of the earthquake, fire and flood had been a straining of relations between SCM and the churches. For a new generation, it was difficult to convince some church leaders with experience of some or all of these events that the new generation was part of the church and wanting to strengthen links and communications. It hurt to be sometimes greeted with suspicion.

From the mid 1980's until 2003, my involvement with SCM moved to the international level, WSCF, where I served as Co-Secretary General and later as Honorary Treasurer. I carry memories of the growth in women's leadership, of leadership development programs, the revival of publications, *Federation News*, the *WSCF Journal*, *Student World*, and others.

WSCF's story, of course, is shaped by the same influences as its member movements. In the 1990's the dismantling of the Iron Curtain has brought an influx of new student movements from Eastern Europe. Regional work in North America is receiving a boost now. There is a focus on globalisation, interfaith issues. The WSCF was prominent at the WCC Assembly in Brazil, distributing stickers that read "WSCF since 1895: ecumenism guaranteed". Plans are afoot for a gathering of senior friends in conjunction with the General Assembly next year. The General Secretary, Michael Wallace is a New Zealander recently ordained a Deacon in the Anglican/Old Catholic Communion.

The view from the forest floor was exciting, daunting and definitely formative. I enjoyed the fellowship of my student friends around me as we worked to nurture the programs and infrastructure. Our community was strong and nurtured by worship, Bible study, healthy discussion and shared meals. The tall trees in the forest, the senior friends, some battle scarred, provided encouragement, support and human and financial resources. There was the rainfall and sunshine of the chaplains and friends in the churches and the ACC who provided spiritual guidance and intellectual stimulation. Then there were the birds, the WSCF friends who visited and helped with pollination, cross fertilisation of ideas. From talking to the tall trees, we could imagine what the forest used to be like. We heard stories of the earthquake, the bushfire and the flood. We had ambitions to recreate such a forest. But the reality was that our growth would be different and would chart a recognisable but different landscape.

The students of today were not born in the 1970's so my experience of SCM has retreated into the undergrowth of history from their point of view. But I wonder if their experience of new growth in an old forest has some similarities. If so, they will have found a community of faith, a community of memory and hope in the SCM. They will appreciate the encouragement of senior friends, financial support for their

work and people in the church who are interested to know how God is working in their lives.

The upheavals of earthquake, fire and flood need not be entirely devastating. The aftermath can also bring new opportunities along with the challenges. In God's scheme of things, the history of the SCM is a brief one in the history of the church and the world. I am convinced that God's Spirit continues to work through the SCM. The question before us is how best to work with that Spirit, to nurture the growth.

Robin's book is a great gift to us. It not only reflects on the earthquake, bushfire and flood, it also listens to the voices from the new growth on the floor of the forest. It will help us all to reflect, listen and respond.