

ASCM interview with the Rev. Dr Sandy Yule by Jane Yule, Melbourne, 11 April 1997.

Q: Where did you go to school and were you involved with any Christian groups there?

A: [I went to] lots of primary schools, and I [did my] secondary schooling at Geelong College where I was a boarder. There was a PFA group and Ewen McLean as chaplain was influential.

Q: Did you go on many activities with PFA?

A: Not many but some. I think it was part of the furniture at that time rather than [being] more influential.

Q: Had you heard of the SCM before going to Melbourne University?

A: Yes, the SCM vein had travelled into our family awareness. I actually tried to go to an SCM conference in 1958, prior to going university. [I saw it] as a way of getting ready to go to university, but they wouldn't have me at that time because they only wanted current members.

Q: So you started at Melbourne University in 1959, studying Philosophy and History to begin with, is that right?

A: Yes, a combined Honours course.

Q: Did you join the SCM immediately on arrival?

A: Pretty much, yes. I went to a freshers' event, which was to welcome potential new members to SCM, and didn't look back.

Q: So what you'd heard about the SCM from your family you found to be correct?

A: Pretty much. [It was] attractive, exploratory, questioning, all of that.

Q: What about more evangelical groups, were they active on campus?

A: Yes, there was an Evangelical Union which had separated from the SCM in 1930 and that was active. I wasn't at all interested in that group. In fact, I was on the [SCM] committee about three years later when we talked with the Evangelical Union people. There were three members of the [SCM] committee

who weren't prepared to sign the Evangelical Union's 'Statement of Belief', and I was one of the three. So co-operation stopped at that point.

Q: What about the Newman Society, did you have much to do with them?

A: The Newman Society and the SCM began to work together more closely during my time in the SCM. [This] was primarily [through] the leadership of John Gaden and Rachel Faggetter, [with] the initial meetings apparently [held] in John Gaden's study in Trinity. There were some quite interesting local conferences between the two groups that happened about 1963, and I think that was very influential, certainly for the SCM and probably also for the Newman Society.

Q: So it was quite radical to have that sort of dialogue between Catholics and Protestants?

A: I believe that it was an historic healing of the long tensions between the two communities, the Catholic and Protestant communities in Australia. I think that that link between those two societies was very influential and important. The new ecumenical relations that have now [been] set up between the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches owe a lot to what was done in those years.

Q: So was it all part of Vatican II?

A: Yes, those two [things] happened in 1963.

Q: So that enabled the Catholics to be more open to [Protestants]?...

A: Yes, it was all part of that spiritual development, I would say.

Q: Was the SCM a big group on campus when you were there?

A: Yes, it was. The first branch conference that I went to, just the Melbourne University branch, had 100 people. This was a sort of three-day conference down at Point Lonsdale and ... there would be 100 people [regularly] at branch conference. The national conference at the end of that year had 400 people.

Q: And where was that held?

A: Adelaide.

Q: So you were still very [large] in number?

A: Yes, [though] it trended down from that 400 and maintained itself until about 1963. Between 1963 and 1970 the numbers dropped each national conference, down to about 120 in Adelaide in 1970.

Q: We'll get back on to that in a minute. [At] Melbourne University at that time was the SCM active in political groups or part of the SRC?

A: The SCM had a kind of a chaplaincy/spiritual role in the university. It would be supportive of organisations like World University Service, it would be concerned for the overall life of the university, and it would exercise indirect influence. ... Sometimes there would be members of the SCM who stood for election to the SRC, and sometimes they'd get on and sometimes they wouldn't. So the activity was never very direct I would say, but more indirect and kind of background.

Q: Did the SCM help you to adjust to student life?

A: Yes.

Q: In what ways?

A: It provided a model for open conversation about issues, and it showed how senior students and academics [could interact]. We actually had professors in our conferences who would be talking about issues that were of concern to them, and this was very powerful. [It was] the sense of being able to address a question with anybody, simply because we were human beings who knew something about it or had questions about it. Learning how to do that was something that the SCM taught me and many others. You had models of that in other ways, in tutorial groups and so on throughout the university, but that was always a little bit more structured and a little less open.

Q: Who were the major staff/academic leaders at the time in the SCM?

A: I can remember Peter Fensham was Professor of Chemistry at that time, and he was at conferences in that first year I was there. Gus Sinclair is another name that comes to mind. Then the theological staff were also called on quite heavily, Colin Williams, George Yule, [Davis McCaughey] and various other people. There were others, I just can't remember who. There were also [non-SCM] people ... who would be invited to these conferences. I can remember [Frank Knopfelmacher] came to address one meeting that was called by the SCM. The

SCM had a pattern of inviting in people from the university to its program of regular lunch-time meetings, and there would be a whole bunch of different people. But every so often [SCM] would sponsor a debate with the Rationalist Society or something of that sort, or would be part of setting up a debate.

Q: Between the staff ...

A: Either staff led or student led. I can remember, probably in about my fourth year, [debating] with a group of speakers about ... 'Is religion necessary to ethics?'. The Rationalist Society were on one side and the SCM and Newman Society people on the other, as I recall. ... I ended up arguing for a middle line, which was not quite on the topic.

Q: ... I'm sure it wouldn't have gone down well with the EU?

A: They were very puzzled by this approach, I think.

Q: What about the main student leaders at the time? Did you still have co-presidents, men and women?

A: Yes, the tradition of co-presidency was a really excellent thing in the SCM. It did mean that men and women exercised, I think, a fairly equal kind of leadership in the SCM. Ian Hamilton and Janet Dean were the presidents in the first year I joined, and the next year it was Brian Howe and Renate Morris, as she then was. John Gaden and Rachel Faggetter I've already mentioned. Anyway, that tradition of co-leadership was very effective.

Q: Do you believe that women's contribution was seen as completely equal?

A: Yes. I believe that the reason why some senior SCM people have a different attitude to feminism than most Christians, and most people of their generation, is the experience of the SCM. Now there might have been some limitations within that, but it was very genuine.

Q: So, for example, one of the limitations might have been that there were not nearly as many women speakers?

A: Yes, that was still pretty much true. The broader limits of the culture were still around and had not been fully addressed, I would say, at that time. I think the SCM took a good hard look at itself in 1973 on the issue of feminist challenges. I would see that as a turning point in the thinking and practice in relation to

feminist issues. But the previous history was a very good history and I think it led male students to have a much better attitude to the contribution of women than might otherwise have been expected in terms of the broader culture, both Christian and secular.

Q: Because at that time Australia was still very conservative?

A: Yes, socially.

Q: Do you remember who the travelling secretaries were at that time?

A: Margaret Bearlin was a travelling secretary, and I remember really valuing her leadership. There were a number, [but] she was a travelling secretary for a slightly longer period than the recent graduates who'd come in for one year and then move on. Margaret's the one I remember, ... but I'm sure there were others who would come to mind if I could just remember.

Q: Margaret commented that she found the SCM quite difficult in a way, because she wasn't from a private school, middle-class background. Would that be one of the comments you would make about the SCM? ...

A: It was very influenced by the private school, middle-class ethos at the time, and that continued to be a struggle in the SCM in the 1970s. I think throughout the SCM's history there's always been some degree of tension around that issue, and it has not always been properly acknowledged or identified.

Q: So who was at head office when you were at university?

A: Doug Hobson was the general-secretary and Joyce Leigh was the office secretary. Joyce had been there for a number of years and was a lovely person [who gave] very faithful service and made a great contribution.

Q: So what was their role, did you have much to do with them as a student member?

A: I think I was involved in some thoughts about organising one of the national conferences, that was one point at which I actually had occasion to go into head office. Otherwise it was only the people who were involved in the area council and the organisation of the SCM who had a lot of close contact with them.

Q: At that stage was Melbourne University the only SCM branch in Victoria?

A: It was the only university. Monash University began in 1961 [and] had an SCM branch shortly after the university was opened. It might have been 1960, I forget, but anyway in 1961 I remember there were Monash SCM people, [such as Cliff Penniceard] coming to local branch conferences.

Q: And where were they held? Point Lonsdale and Chum Creek?

A: No. Chum Creek was used for smaller conferences on a weekend, study conferences, but not for the branch conference which had 100 people. Chum Creek couldn't take 100 people, so they'd hire ... 'Toc H' at Point Lonsdale or [one of the] church conference sites.

Q: And what about the national conferences? ...

A: They were usually held at Geelong Grammar in Victoria.

Q: Again the private school connection, I suppose?

A: Partly that, but also because of the size. You could have 400 people on site, one of the few places you could do that.

Q: Were there any particular conferences that influenced you or impressed you more than any others?

A: Each conference made an impact on me. There was always a carefully planned Bible study, a carefully planned set of speakers, [and discussion around] some theological and contemporary life issues. There were people from overseas there, [and] leading academics came and spoke.

Q: Any in particular?

A: I can remember the first conference I ever went to. Harry Morton from South India, an English missionary who was big in the Church of South India, did a Bible study and I remember being very impressed by it. ... Gough Whitlam came to a conference in about 1963 to talk about the White Australia Policy and anti-racist issues.

Q: His sister Frieda was in the SCM, wasn't she?

A: Yes, she was Principal of PLC in Sydney.

Q: What about quiet times at SCM conferences? Were they important to you?

A: Yes. Looking back on it I'd say that was a really important part of [my] spiritual formation. It came from the Quaker tradition but the SCM had picked it up. They'd have a half-hour quiet time, which would be introduced with somebody who'd say some things [and] maybe a Bible reading. [Then] you'd go out for half an hour on your own, and just sit and think and pray or do what you wanted to do, come back and sing another hymn and that would be the end of it. ... I think it was an Adelaide conference [where] the phrase had been 'Be still and know that I am God'. I remember just sitting with that.

Q: What about the different denominations? There was mainly Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist ... within the SCM?

A: And Lutheran, in Adelaide, some Lutherans, and Quakers.

Q: Not many?

A: No, not many but significant [numbers and] significant leadership from the Quakers as well.

Q: Was there tension between denominations and the way you worshipped?

A: Particularly the Anglicans were still reserved about [inter-]communion at the time that I joined the SCM, and that's since [changed] ... but it was then the case. So that was a point of tension. I think after that it was more a matter of opening up to each other's styles and learning from [them], and [also] that [more] individual difficulties would always be experienced. Some people liked the pietism and piety and others didn't; some people liked the set order of worship [while] others liked the spontaneity and the charisma; some liked the hymns and some liked the preaching. There were all those differences but they tended to be openly approached and people would be encouraged to experience the other tradition and learn from it. And that happened.

Q: Was there equal leadership from each of the denominations?

A: Not totally, mechanically equal, but significant leadership from all of those denominations, yes. And ... [while this is] actually a matter of the spirit, it was [also] a matter of people being recognised as having something to contribute and trying to maximise that creative contribution. I think the SCM was good at doing that.

Q: Did you ever have any non-SCMers at camps, people who would just come along [out of] interest? ...

A: [Not large numbers, but] that was certainly encouraged. It was certainly an open agenda and [there was] no difficulty about anybody coming who was not a member. One of the big debates in the SCM at the time was whether membership of the SCM should be open to all people or only open to those who could affirm the SCM's basis. The preponderance of argument tended to favour open membership. I'm not sure of the precise history of that debate overall, but I know that that was an important point of debate. What you might call the open form of evangelism—making the Gospel available to all people simply on the basis that they were people and that they want to be part of the discussion—tended to win out. It [also] led to the well-known amorphousness of the SCM's thought patterns and organisational patterns. But my own view was that it was a matter of faithfulness to the spirit of God, rather than just human confusion.

Q: And what about Catholic students, did they ever come to camp?

A: Not in the early 1960s. The joint meetings with the Newman Society were really the first point of contact in any significant way with Catholic students. There might have been one or two individuals, but there wouldn't have been more than that.

Q: Any Jewish students?

A: There were some friendships and some connections with Jewish students but, again, not really significant. I don't recall a significant Christian–Jewish dialogue at that time. There probably were some good conversations but they were informal rather than formal. I think that's probably what happened, [though] I don't have a specific memory of that.

Q: What about political issues? What were the hot topics of the day for SCM?

A: The SCM was quite involved in the movement against the White Australia Policy. SCM people had been influential in the group that produced a booklet called 'Control or Colour Bar', which was one of the early challenges to the White Australia Policy in the late 1950s. ... [They were also part of the broader] student movement at the university [that] made demonstrations against the Menzies' [government] during the [election] campaign. I remember being in the Kew Town Hall when Robert Menzies was speaking, and being part of a group that

had come to heckle him about the White Australia Policy. They actually [sang] some songs and [had] banners outside the meeting. [However,] inside the meeting Menzies put us all down in his inimitable style [by saying], 'You wouldn't be at university if it wasn't for my government giving you scholarships', which was quite interesting to think about. But that was [an example of] SCM being part of the broader student movement around that issue. ... The other big campaign was the anti-hanging campaign, and SCM people were heavily involved in that as well. I'll always remember being part of a picket line, [and] walking up and down [outside] the front of Parliament House. There was a roster of people to picket the state parliament about the hanging of Tate, and I think I'm right in saying he wasn't hanged in the [end]. He had been slated to be hanged, but there was a big public campaign in which Melbourne University was heavily involved at a student level. SCM people, including myself, were involved in that.

Q: ... What about Aboriginal issues, were they important?

A: They were important but not ... [so high profile as in more recent years].

Q: Because it was 1962 when Aboriginal people finally got the vote.

A: ... 1967 was the big referendum, wasn't it? ... [But] OK, 1962 they got the vote, ... [and they were granted] full citizenship [when] there was a referendum on Aboriginal citizenship in 1967.

Q: ... But was it an issue for the SCM at the time?

A: Yes, it was. It was certainly a concern and it was a concern about which people were very perplexed. I don't think we had a good sense of direction, we didn't have good sense of political alliance or political agenda, [and] we were not close to Aboriginal people at that time.

Q: There certainly weren't any [Aboriginal students] at the university.

A: That's right [in general], but there was a concern for Aboriginal scholarships. In fact, I met Margot Weir at the centenary gathering, ... [and] she said she was one of the first Aboriginal tertiary students in Australia in the late 1950s. [She was] a student of Education, [perhaps at Melbourne Teachers' College], and had been supported by Aboriginal scholarships. ... [There was an organisation called Abschol that raised money for scholarships for Aboriginal people to come to university, and SCM people were heavily involved in this at Melbourne University. Margot] was actually at some of these branch conferences in 1959, [and] so I think there was [some] support and connection for Aboriginal people.

Q: Even if it wasn't the radicalisation that happened in the 1970s and 1980s.

A: [It was] different from that. It was much more a matter of saying, 'Well here's university education and Aboriginal people need this if they're going to find their way forward'. That was the vision at that time, and Aboriginal scholarships was the main ... shape of what was done to make that happen, or help that to happen.

Q: And the Cold War was going on at that stage. Was there much discussion about communism still?

A: Absolutely, yes. I remember ... a youth delegation from the Soviet Union came out in 1959, 1960, and SCM actually met with that delegation informally in an evening meeting I [was] at. There was a lot of awareness of KGB involvement in the youth organisation, and [a little] suspicion about their political manipulation, but the idea was that we should meet with these people as people and that happened. I think the SCM was trying to find a way through the Cold War stand-off and to recognise the sinfulness and the faults on both sides, and the manipulation by American and Australian governments as well as by the Soviet Union.

Q: Because you would have been aware then, I suppose, [of American foreign policy, as] the Bay of Pigs was 1962.

A: 1961.

Q: 1961, so there was perhaps a realisation that America had its problems politically as well as Russia, but in a different way?

A: Yes, [though] the civil rights struggle was probably more important in terms of our critique of American political life, but the Cold War was another factor. We were aware of Australian scientists, [including some SCM-related people,] being involved in an organisation called Pugwash, which was an attempt to get scientists from both sides talking to each other and co-operating in terms of the promotion of both science and peace.

Q: Was there a sense of nuclear threat at the time?

A: Yes, very strong, a great sense of danger.

Q: ... [Were] the tests at Maralinga ... out in the open then?

A: At university there was an awareness of our ignorance and of the degree to which this was created by official secrecy. So that there was a lot of rumour, a lot of suspicion, a lot of reflection, [and] a lot of attempts to put together some information, some knowledge. I would say that the protests that grew in the 1960s and 1970s came out of those initial concerns.

Q: And was this supported by an SCM publishing program as well that would try and give you a different picture to the story?

A: Yes. ... There was an SCM bookshop [and] Alan Watson was the manager of that for a long time. He'd been a travelling secretary. He eventually went to Western Australia [to] a university publishing operation at the University of Western Australia.

Q: Was that bookshop in the city?

A: It used to be. It went out of business, I forget exactly when, but perhaps in the middle 1960s. SCM Press in Britain was very important, the World Student Christian Federation had its publications, and Australia had *Crux*, [which used to be] the *Intercollegian*. ... In the pages of those magazines you'd find really thoughtful ways of addressing these issues, [in particular] you'd find a lot about Christian attitudes to the Cold War.

Q: Were there any other magazines that you were reading at the time? [For example,] was the SCM heavily influenced by the left do you think?

A: The SCM was certainly influenced by the left, [but it] was attempting to maintain spiritual orientation while dealing with real world issues. So that always meant an uneasy dialogue with more humanist and sort of secular, political people and their agendas, and that's true on the right as well as the left. I can remember meeting with Don Chip, a Liberal member [who] came to talk about White Australia, informally around a table with people from the student movement. This would have been in about 1961 or thereabouts, [and while it was] just an informal talk he was concerned [enough] to come and talk to students about that. [This] was the kind of dialogue happen[ing] at that time.

Q: In the early 1960s, too, there were big changes in the mainstream churches. [For example, was] John Robinson's 'Honest To God' important to you?

A: Yes, [Bishop] John Robinson's thesis was important. ... What he was saying was that many of the dogmas of the church can't be sustained in the light of modern knowledge. So he was wanting to find a way of conceiving of God which was compatible with modern scientific views of the world, that's what he was looking for. I don't myself think that his ways are necessarily good answers, [rather that] he was important more for putting the questions out in the public arena. I personally had already found those questions and was struggling with them before he wrote [his book]. I didn't find a lot of help from his writing apart from the fact that it gave me the company of other people, including a bishop, who actually thought these things were important to think about, worry about and try to resolve.

I also think that too narrow a view of reality was taken at that time. That is, [that] the Enlightenment view of reality is too restrictive and does not include many significant human experiences of a more mystical kind, and that those experiences do show us things that we need to take notice of. But [Robinson's thesis] was powerfully influential at the time. Many people eventually left the church because of the fact that they could not get past a totally humanist reading of the world, and a kind of an ethical reading of the Christian tradition. I think that unless there is a spiritual basis to it, then they're right. It's only when you find a spiritual basis beyond ethics and beyond ordinary levels of historical experience that church life makes a lot of sense.

Q: And in the 1960s, towards the end more than the beginning, the SCM had a drastic decline in numbers. Do you think these theological debates were part of the reason why this decline happened or do you think it had more to do with the broader political scene?

A: I think it was more the crisis of confidence and more the theology than the broad political thing, [which] I think was actually quite well addressed previously and in quite viable ways. But what was really damaging was the fact that people could no longer believe in God, and that the worship at the time ceased to carry people into a belief in God. [This meant that] the worship tended to focus perhaps on worldly concerns, and human political agendas would come in and shape the way in which we dealt with those concerns in worship. So the spiritual resources of the Christian faith were not seen as relevant by too many people at that time. I think that that's the mistake which has now been recognised and which allows people to go on with Christian faith in the present. You have to attend to the spiritual level and the spiritual resources in order to find this way of approaching problems sensibly.

Q: Because in the mid-1960s ... the civil rights campaign was going on in America, which was a very big issue for the world in terms of what the outcome would mean. Also the Vietnam War was becoming the burning issue for that decade, at least for America, Australia and the Vietnamese.

A: Yes, definitely.

Q: But 1968 was an incredible year for student unrest all around the world. ... Do you think that had a lot to do with the decline of groups like the SCM on campus?

A: Yes. I think the broad student movement was able to show direct relevance and urgency about those issues in a way which captured the attention of students, particularly the more open and seeking kind of students. And so many of them went straight into those activities, where previously they would have gone into an organisation that was helping to set an agenda.

Q: Like the SCM?

A: Yes, like the SCM. [But] the agenda was already set and people rushed off to where that agenda was most powerfully being addressed, which was out in the broad student movement. So there is a sense in which people didn't go into the

SCM because of that [political] shape [with]in the university; I think that's true. So the SCM was then challenged to find its way, [and made] to relate to those urgent public issues and to maintain[ing] its own sort of other agenda. And it struggled with that at that time.

Q: With the Vietnam War, it was ... seen by so many as an unjust war and one that they should not be involved in, that perhaps the church could have given more guidance on that issue. Is that what Christian students were looking for?

A: No, I don't think I would say the church failed to give guidance on that issue. The SCM discussed Vietnam in 1966, I understand, in a very significant way, and from 1966 onwards the SCM was aware of the injustices in that war in a fairly clear way. SCM maintained a reasonably strong opposition to that war and was a contributor to the opposition to the war at least from 1966. So I don't think it's true that the SCM or even the churches failed to offer leadership. I think it's a more subtle matter of whether they were seen as relevant to [be] responding to that issue and, for many students, the world's agenda. One of the rhetoric in the early 1960s was 'Let the world write the agenda', [which] was [part of] this opening out to the world in all its need. This was an opening out of [the] Christian faith, ... [and] was about being part of God's mission in the world, meeting the needs of the world, healing the sicknesses, healing the evils, [and] addressing injustice. That was all part of God's work in the world and many people caught that vision from the churches, as well as perhaps from just the spirit of the times. But what they didn't count on enough, in my view, was their own need for sustenance in addressing those needs, and for a sense of working with God in the long journey through life. That's what people have found since, that there is perhaps some need not to be burnt out. How do you regenerate after losing a few battles out there in the big, bad, political world?

Q: So you were [studying] in America during the civil rights campaigns? ...

A: Yes, the latter end of it, 1966 to 1969.

Q: But there was no SCM in America at that stage that you were a part of?

A: No. I was part of ... the Princeton Seminary community.

Q: Did they partake in any activities of the civil rights movement?

A: They were supportive of the civil rights struggle and there were some speakers. I remember Ralph Abernathy was invited to speak at the seminary, probably about 1968 [or] maybe 1969. I can remember also being involved in a demonstration of Christians and laity concerned about Vietnam. This was in January 1967, and a very small group of us went down to join that demonstration in Washington. I remember marching outside the White House and talking to one or two senators and congresspeople.

Q: Was that the huge demonstration that [had been] organised?

A: I think it was different from that. It was a church-based one, but it was the first point of respectable protest about the war within America. [It was the] one that really made an impact in terms of the general public and the consciousness of the fact that it needed to be thought about as a matter of public policy.

Q: Then you returned to Australia in 1970 and became SCM general-secretary.

A: April 1970.

Q: Was Vietnam big on your agenda still?

A: Yes.

Q: And were the churches generally behind ending the war at that stage?

A: Yes, I think at least the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church, it would probably be true to say, were behind concern about the war. There was a group called Christians for Peace, ... not a large group but in Melbourne there was a march in December 1970 that I helped to organise under the heading Christians for Peace. And there was a group of Catholic people who were also very concerned about the war. [There was] a lot of individual organising and initiative, and some people would take action [while] others were just concerned about it. So it's very hard to generalise.

Q: Coming back to Australia after five years away how did you find the SCM? It must have been a different organisation from the one you left in 1966?

A: Yes, it was. It was sort of smaller, much less self-confident, [and] aware of a gap between the present generation and the past. The student generation that I was called to work with in 1970 were aware of trying to pioneer new ways, and

not being confident that they had the support of the [past] SCM[ers]. I would say that the senior friends in SCM tended to divide at that time between those who wanted the old ways maintained, and who, therefore, did not really support further development, and a very significant and large group who did and still do. But I think that there was enough of a change of direction then for some people to decide that this was no longer the SCM that they knew and loved.

Q: What about the students at the time? How many were there, more or less, and had their concerns changed greatly from ten years before when you were involved as a student?

A: ... The student groups were not very numerous, [and] there were student groups [that had had a long history] actually going out of existence at that time. The agenda was a matter of re-thinking the SCM's past, as well as re-thinking the Christian faith and re-thinking the vision of society. So all of that was being re-thought by that group of students, I would say, [which] led to some decisions to [change direction]. ... Joyce Leigh left the office, I think it was 1969 or thereabouts, and I would use that as a marker for this change of regime in the SCM. Joyce was a very pastoral person, very concerned for all the membership and the people, and the new agenda was much more political, I would say, and ideologically oriented. There was a concern for spirituality but it was in the background. Looking back on it, I think what I brought into the role of general-secretary was an attempt to keep the spiritual connectedness there, while still addressing those worldly, ideological and organisational issues.

Q: Because I guess the SCM during the 1970s had as much in common with the secular lobby groups as any other Christian groups.

A: Yes.

Q: And anti-uranium and Aboriginal land rights were becoming big issues.

A: I remember being part of the organising group for the Movement Against Uranium Mining [in its] initial discussions, and I think that's quite true. I think the SCM had a lot of common cause with secular groups around all of those environmental and humanitarian issues.

Q: Was that a change, too, that the SCM was actually now interested in environmental issues, [like] the Movement Against Uranium Mining, [as] before that it wasn't very common, was it?

A: No, this emerged in the middle 1970s [and] was not powerful prior to [then]. It was part of the general intellectual community's increased awareness of ecological issues and problems and challenges, which happened between about 1972 and 1975. Scientists came out to talk with larger groups of people about their concerns during that time, and the SCM was part of that movement.

Q: Do you think some of the senior friends saw that as not being so important as perhaps other issues?

A: No, I don't think that's true. A lot of senior friends were themselves concerned about those issues and were part of that. I don't think that was a point of division.

Q: I just remember Charles Birch saying he found a lot of [them were].

A: Maybe that's true in Sydney.

Q: He said the SCM in general weren't that interested and he'd always been fighting against that.

A: He was, of course, one of the powerful voices that was listened to at that time, and his experience of that might be a little different. Also because he's based in Sydney, and I'm talking more from a base in Melbourne, I suspect there may be a difference there.

Q: Yes, Sydney and Melbourne are quite different in ideologies even.

A: I think it's more the numbers, ... [as] the same dynamics are there in both places. I think the balance of numbers might be a little different, and certainly Charles' experiences of that would be quite different from mine.

Q: When did the SCM offices move to Fitzroy? Was that in your time?

A: Yes. I suppose I was the one who moved it, with the concurrence of the executive. I joined the SCM office in April 1970 [when] it was in a little room in Swanston Street. [It was on the] third floor of a building in Swanston Street, very isolated [and] not connected with anything much. We had one other travelling secretary, Jim Siemon, who was leaving at the end of the year and an office

secretary, part-time. Toward the end of 1970, I discovered the Fitzroy church. Brian Howe was the Methodist missionary in Fitzroy at the time, and the Fitzroy Ecumenical Centre and the Fitzroy church had consolidated themselves at the Napier Street site. So in January 1971 we moved the office to that site, and then occupied the space in the suite of buildings at the back of the church there.

Q: And there was no one who thought that was a bad idea at the time?

A: I don't recall any problem or question about that.

End of Side A: Side B.

Q: So at the Napier Street site, did you establish student houses as well?

A: Yes. The church had two or three houses and when they became vacant one of the possibilities, that we actually made [a] reality, [was using them as student housing]. I was appointed as one of the two ministers in the parish in November 1972, when it was formed as a united parish prior to the Uniting Church being formed in 1977. It was part of my double responsibility [as both minister and general-secretary], which led to the use of church property in 1973 as an SCM house. There were nine students who moved in initially, and the vision of that time was that this would help to consolidate some of the leadership of the SCM in connection with the office, and in connection with their own ability to support each other and [engage in] dialogue about issues in a more intensive way.

Q: What about national conferences at that time? Was the first one held with the Newman Society during this time?

A: It happened before I came, in January 1970. ... I forget where it was, but there were three joint conferences with the Tertiary Catholic Federation of Australia, of which the Newman Society at Melbourne was a member. ... The second one was in Tasmania and that was virtually the last we heard of the SCM in Tasmania for quite a while. They put a lot of effort into organising [it, but] ran out of steam after that somehow, which was not uncommon in SCMs at that time. And in 1974 in Sydney, the event had about eight times as many Catholic members as it had SCM members. [It was] very unbalanced and the organising had been done largely jointly, so that the actual program had lots of SCM concerns and somewhat radical ideas. I remember there was [even] a film featuring Che Guevara. There was [also] a dialogue involving two of the leading Marxists on

the Sydney University Philosophy Department, along with Krister Stendall, who was a New Testament theologian from Harvard, and Rabbi Brian Fox talking about Christian–Jewish matters. It was a very open, liberal sort of program, but the two organisations felt that the imbalances were such that this should not continue to be a form of life thereafter.

Q: So that was the end of it?

A: That was the end of joint conferences, not the end of co-operation, but the end of joint conferences. Each organisation ran their own conferences after that.

Q: So while you were general-secretary did you travel around Australia much visiting the various groups?

A: Yes, constant travel.

Q: At that stage were there any travelling secretary positions?

A: No, no. There had been as many as fourteen staff workers in the 1950s at certain times, I understand. ... But once Jim Siemon left the staff at the end of 1970, I think I'm right in saying that I was the only appointee of the SCM apart from the part-time office secretary.

Q: Who was?

A: Her name was Julie Hancock, until she resigned in 1973, and after that it was Gwen Newman, who was Peter Fensham's sister. Gwen was much loved by generations of students.

Q: So you'd travel regularly to Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, [Canberra, Adelaide]?

A: Yes.

Q: Northern Territory at all?

A: No, but I did travel to James Cook University in Townsville once or twice, often in relation [to my] international travel for WSCF. I remember visiting in Japan and the Philippines on the way back from my time in Princeton to finish my thesis. I visited James Cook University as well as Brisbane on my way down, and also Tasmania until we lost contact with [them]. I remember two trips to Perth I managed in the five years, [or] it might ... possibly [have been] three.

Q: So were numbers still declining then or were they fairly constant at a low rate?

A: I think numbers declined a bit, but there was a kind of fluctuation that happened. The pattern [whereby] the SCM [membership became] almost the same thing as the SCM committee in most branches came into style. So that ... the SCM was perpetuated, I would say, by cell groups on most campuses from that time, and the ability to run a program that included a wider group of people was not guaranteed. There were some SCMs that managed that, there were other SCMs that didn't manage that.

Q: Did many of them have help from senior friends, or had a lot of senior friends become disillusioned with the SCM by this stage?

A: I would say there was a very faithful group of senior friends that travelled with the SCM right through this whole period, and without their support there would have been less continuity than we've seen. However, it has to be said that in 1980 at the national conference on Raymond Island [at the Gippsland Lakes], there were only fifteen current card-carrying students at that conference and something like ninety or so senior friends and [their] families. At that time a decision was taken that the SCM needed to have less presence from senior friends, at least at its national conference and probably in other ways, so that the student branches could be built up. The SCM has been building branches as a [much more] conscious agenda ever since. ...

Q: What about area councils, were they still in operation?

A: Area councils have been in operation throughout, [and] although not every area council has maintained a full continuity [they] have been maintained. In Victoria, the energy for the area council work has shifted from the student group at Melbourne to the student group at Monash for quite a time, but this will probably come back to the student group at Melbourne. ... The area council itself has maintained continuity.

Q: [As] general-secretary did you travel a lot overseas for WSCF conferences?

A: I was mainly representing the SCM in WSCF events, and then doing associated travel to visit SCMs in nearby countries. When I went to the Addis Ababa Assembly in Africa, for example, I arranged to visit the University Christian Movement people in South Africa. At that time I visited three people who were under banning orders and I had to be there with them alone. I actually made tape recordings of the conversations and took those tape recordings to the WSCF Africa region people, so that they could at least hear the voice of these banned people who were hard to contact. I also visited SCM people in Zimbabwe. So it was that kind of pattern of going to a meeting, and looking to see what other useful visits could be made on the way.

Q: What was Australia's contribution to the WSCF at that time? ... Did the Australian SCM have an agenda in an international sense?

A: I would say the Australian SCM has had an agenda of continued contact and participation in the world body, and that agenda has been very important in sustaining the SCM's presence in Australia. I think without that sense of a link with particularly the Asia-Pacific region, but also the broader WSCF, it would have been very hard to sustain a sense of identity within Australia. The dynamics supporting SCM within Australia have been at a very low ebb, but the world body has been able to help focus issues and concern, and a sense of viability in the SCM's agenda. [This] has been quite powerful with those who've been involved in Australia in the last twenty-five years.

Q: With the Asia-Pacific region, for example, would part of the SCM's agenda be gender issues? How was that received in countries where [they are] not quite so important?

A: In the Asian-Pacific region, Australia and New Zealand have been two of the leading groups, along with perhaps Singapore and possibly Hong Kong [and the] Philippines now, in really pushing gender issues. That's been a slow process and digestion and response, but, yes, it's been a constant struggle and dialogue I would say.

Q: And, similarly, with human rights issues?

A: Australia has been given a role in human rights networking and activism by the WSCF Asia-Pacific office recently, in the ten years, partly because of our

political situation, that people engaged in that would have less trouble with their government here than in some other places. So, yes, that's happened.

Q: Would they be two significant contributions by Australia to the WSCF?

A: Yes, definitely.

Q: Have there been any others in particular?

A: ... In terms of WSCF Asia-Pacific, there's always been a contribution from Australia in terms of what you might call the language issue. Australians, as native English speakers, have always been able to help the overall body to be precise in its formulation of its agenda, along with a lot of other people obviously. I think Australia has not been too big to be a problem for them, but it's been big enough to be a sort of conversation partner. [This has meant that] the Western character of the Australian experience has been helpful to the WSCF Asia people in their struggle with the Western colonial legacy in their own countries.

Q: Is there any animosity at all between ex-colonial countries and Australia ... or a black-white divide?

A: That's been a problem only at the points where, [for example,] African groups have been wondering about [the] Australian SCM's role in relation to Aboriginal people. At the Addis Ababa [1973] Assembly, I remember being heavily challenged on this issue [of] the colonial, oppressive nature of Australia's relations with Aboriginal people, and why weren't there Aboriginal people in the Australian delegation. Those were the sort of questions that they were quite rightly asking.

Q: So did you then take that back to the SCM, saying what are we going to do about Aboriginal issues?

A: Yes, ... not that we got good answers, but yes.

Q: So that became more of an issue because of WSCF involvement, in a way?

A: It was another factor in keeping that as a high level of concern.

Q: What about Port Moresby [in 1970]? What did you do there? ...

A: In 1970 there was a quite significant ecumenical consultation held in Port Moresby. I [had] found out about it through the WSCF/World Council [of Churches] offices in Geneva [when I was there] before I came back to Australia. I was invited to be a participant in that ecumenical consultation, [though] I forget exactly why now. ... [It] was part of a general sort of ecumenical stirring in the churches around issues, in their case, of nation building and preparing for what was going to be the shape of Papua New Guinea in the future, and how the church was going to contribute positively to that. It was a really interesting event.

Q: And in Fiji, the same sort of thing?

A: In 1974 I was asked by the WSCF to help set up a consultation about WSCF work in the Pacific. There was a Fiji SCM and Akuila Yabaki was the general-secretary, so he and I were probably the two people who organised that event. There were some unsuccessful features in our organisation at that time, but the event itself, I think, was fairly successful in articulating a spiritual–socio-political agenda in the Pacific on behalf of the WSCF. And Marshall Fernando from Sri Lanka was appointed as the WSCF Pacific appointee for, I think, a three-year term on the basis of that consultation, so it was successful in its outcome. There were, as I say, some untoward things in the organisation.

Q: What in particular?

A: We invited some Aboriginal people to participate and were unsuccessful in securing their arrival. I was not aware of their non-arrival until we were actually in Fiji. So that was really embarrassing and awkward, but this was my own naivety as an organiser, of which I could say more.

Q: Why had they not arrived?

A: It had not been properly negotiated with them and that was my responsibility.

Q: But then again it was early days of any sort of dialogue between Aboriginal Australians and white Australians?

A: It was partly that but it was partly my own naivety. I think that I would, as a matter of historical record, say that I am now aware of significant organisational naivety in myself as general-secretary. There were some things that weren't done

at that time that should have been done, [that really] should have been done, which were not done because of my organisational naivety. This is partly because other people weren't there to fill in the gaps and do things in support as well. So it was partly an organisational lack.

Q: But you must have been working in isolation ... as the only paid staff worker?

A: Yes, I was. [But] there was an executive committee that was always supportive and helpful, but it was all voluntary people and it was only as good as the information [it] got. And so the things that I didn't feel [were] issues to alert them [to], or that nobody else thought to think about, didn't happen. In 1971 I remember reading in the newsletter, that I wrote, an apology to the broader membership of the SCM for not having advertised a position [for someone] to go [on] a leadership training course that the WSCF was organising in Asia. We appointed somebody that we knew was available without having advertised it publicly. Now that was really naive and really stupid, because there were other people who would perhaps have been interested in going and who might have been better candidates. I realise that now, but at the time this was something that I'd not had experience of doing before, and other people around me didn't suggest this process so it didn't happen.

Q: Perhaps there was also a lack of institutional knowledge as well?

A: Yes. We'd just cut our links with that whole institutional past and this was the down-side of doing that.

Q: Also in 1974 you went to South Korea as part of the WSCF delegation, is that right?

A: Yes. [Going there was] an example of both the international solidarity of the WSCF, and the kind of way in which the SCM's special spiritual concerns were being translated politically and in terms of action. What had happened was that in April, a number of students and other Christian leaders had been arrested and imprisoned in South Korea as part of a government crackdown against democratic demonstrations. The government line was that these were agents of North Korea or were connected with agents of North Korea. The WSCF organised a delegation to visit the government, the churches and the SCM of South Korea. There were five people on the delegation, eventually, [namely]

myself, James Ekwaro from the [inter-]regional office, Tom Veerkamp from the European SCMs, and Gus Schultz from ... the [ecumenical] American campus [Christian] organizations. These were seen as the politically useful forces to bring into South Korea. We were also joined by Osamu Shiraishi from Japan, who was interested in the Japanese involvement in civil rights and [his country's] history with Korea, which is a bad one.

Anyway, we went there for six days and we met with government people, as well as church and SCM people, and a range of other Christian activist groups. [It] ended up with a press conference at the end, in which we said that we had investigated and couldn't find anything much in the government case, and thought [that all those arrested in this case] should be released forthwith. Other groups apparently came in later with other agendas, [though a] similar[ly] broad agenda, and virtually all of those people were released within about ten months.

Q: That must have been very heartening?

A: Yes. At the time I wasn't sure what the effect had been, because the government did actually execute eight people whom they called North Korean spies ... [in connection with this case]. I remember being very depressed about that. But my Korean friends tell me that the action was, in fact, successful in getting them released and in helping the democratic forces to maintain their voice within Korea at that time.

Q: It's been a very long struggle, really.

A: It has, yes.

Q: Also in 1974 there was a Paulo Freire conference. Can you tell us about that?

A: Yes. Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who pioneered a method of literacy for ... illiterate, oppressed groups in Brazil, and political disfavour with the regime was associated with that. He was working for the World Council [of Churches] at the time, [and] Cliff Wright and others organised for him to come to Melbourne to talk with groups interested in education and liberation, and in some of his ideas about liberating pedagogy. There was a group of about eighty people, a very carefully invited group (many more would have liked to come), and that included a wide range of trade union people, other political activists, church leaders, educational activists, and I was there as SCM [representative].

It was, I think, quite an interesting event simply for the questions that it raised about how a liberating pedagogy might take place within Australia. [For example,] what were the groups that might need something of this approach, what were the questions that needed to be asked? [It was a] very rich conversation. So, again, it was this mix of spiritual concern with a fairly clear political way of working, a political agenda.

Q: Do you think in the 1970s most students were more interested in a political agenda than [they were] with spiritual concerns? Was that one of the [reasons for such] a small SCM membership, that people didn't need the SCM?

A: I think the articulation of this new political agenda and vision was powerful at that time, and that tended to swamp the small voice of spiritual concern. I don't think it ever wiped it out, but I think it did swamp it, yes.

Q: So was liberation theology a way of perhaps merging the two concerns together for some people?

A: Yes, certainly.

Q: And did this come about more in the 1970s?

A: In Australia, yes, I think so. That was a response to the 'Death of God', and I think quite an interesting and valid one.

Q: And that [has] carried through up until now, really?

A: Until now, yes.

Q: So ... the theology of the SCM [from] when you were originally in it has changed enormously?

A: I wouldn't say enormously, but it has changed very significantly and quite dramatically, yes. When I first joined the SCM the powerful theologians were Barth and Tillich, particularly, [but] also Rudolph Bultmann. [There was] a critical approach to Scripture, [which was] very powerful. What that left people with, I think, was a concern for this world and its needs, and an attempt to bring the Christian Gospel to bear upon this world and its needs. [This] was particularly [about] the forgiveness of sins and the sense of the Holy Spirit empowering us to the fullness of love. Now ... in some ways that's close to the heart of liberation theology. But liberation theology often has a special and more

clearly political, 'this worldly' agenda for bringing up the oppressed groups into positions of power. So the empowering themes in liberation theology carried right on from this earlier more liberal theology. But I think some of the other themes got a bit lost in some versions, anyway, of liberation theology.

Q: And also it's got a sort of Marxist flavour to it, really, which perhaps the liberal theology didn't have?

A: Yes. Marxism was important in the transition from that sort of liberal theology into liberation theology, partly because it's talking about oppressed groups and, therefore, the politics of oppressed groups and the authority that they can be seen to have.

Q: While this was going on in SCM, as in movements like liberation theology which were important to them, do you think the mainstream Protestant churches in Australia were in touch in the same way as the SCM was?

A: I would say that the spiritual forces that led to the formation of the Uniting Church came, to quite a significant degree, out of the SCM and affected the whole future of the Uniting Church. You can see that in the key leadership and I just think it's a fact. There were many other forces as well, but I think that was one of the powerful and important ones. And I would say the Uniting Church has carried that same set of questions and agendas, at least at some level, in its more creative leadership from its foundation. So in that sense, the SCM and the Uniting Church have had a very similar agenda. I think the same's been true in the more creative and perhaps left-wing, but certainly more critical, elements within the Anglican Church, the Catholic Church and the other [denominations].

Q: Do you think there is a difference then between the Melbourne Diocese of the Anglican church and the Sydney [Diocese]?

A: Certainly.

Q: Because Sydney certainly would not see liberation theology as [desirable].

A: No. They would struggle more with that whole set of issues in my perception.

Q: So towards the end of the 1970s you were still involved as a Senior Friend with the SCM?

A: Yes.

Q: And you went to the camp that you mentioned, [the one] with more senior friends than students?

A: Yes, I went to the national conference after leaving the staff of the SCM. I and [my wife] Fay and [our children] Rebecca and Martin went to the national conferences of the SCM until 1981.

Q: And were there tensions before that 1980 conference between Friends and members?

A: Not so much, not so much. I think there was a generation of SCM leadership in the late 1970s that had accepted the spiritual challenge to live poor. [For example,] the SCM in 1975 chose to give away significant amounts of money from its heritage to WSCF work in Asia. When I went to South Korea, I took \$US2000 as a gift from the Australian SCM to help them with their publications and struggle; that was one of the gestures that was made financially at that time. It [came partly out] of a sense of having a well-endowed heritage, [and] was part of the self-criticism, spiritually, of that organisational heritage. [It was thought] that in order to find out what God wanted of this organisation in the future we would take the risks of living poor, and that happened. It meant that the normal human organisational regeneration was very, very hard to achieve. [It certainly] became too hard at that moment in 1980.

Q: Because of the lack of funds?

A: Because of lack of funds, lack of staff, lack of publications, lack of infrastructure, lack of all the normal organisational supports, really, or [at least] the winding down of those things. And from that moment in 1980, there has been a clear commitment to rebuild that organisational base. It's still building from that commitment, I would say. But I personally believe that that was the kind of movement of the spirit [on] which the future of the SCM was, as it were, mandated. ... There was a calling to people to continue what could now be called

the maintenance of ecumenical Christian ministry on campuses, and that's the shape that it now takes. The SCM's own organisational shape was really to support that, I would say.

Q: Because the campuses have changed enormously in the [past] thirty years.

A: Certainly.

Q: [What sort of effect] do you think [these] massive changes, ... particularly in the past decade [with] the shift in priority from ideas to vocation and [in your words] the 'individualisation of student life, ... [have] had on organisations like the SCM?

A: It has had a devastating effect on all voluntary organisations. People are just not socialised to join with organisations for their own formation in a holistic way. It used to be that you would join an organisation which would give you all these opportunities for personal and social development, and [enable you] to contribute to society through the life and work of that organisation. Now that model is in crisis in Australia at this time, [and has become] very hard to sustain. The alternatives for personal development are much more individually targeted [and] marketed. People opt into specific opportunities, they go to one-off events characteristically now, and the long-term networks can be seen as very private, [as in] you just stay with your friends. People just don't see value in that older form of commitment because they see it as either too imprisoning—that you are too vulnerable to other people's agendas within organisations—too hard, [or] too much of a hassle for negotiations. [In other words that] you have to learn to fight fair and live with the outcome. And all of that spiritual preparedness is very hard to sustain. I think that's had a powerful effect upon student life at universities, [while] the shape of student life has fed back into that whole cultural approach and now powerfully confirms those cultural approaches.

Q: Because the SCM, and groups like it, do have a role to play in the education system, surely?

A: There is a need there and there is a role to play there, and the difficulty is selling that to current generations of students.

Q: On that topic, what do you think is the best way to go? ... The Uniting Church has appointed a chaplain at Sydney University, [while] the North Melbourne Parish has funded a development worker to work with the SCM on the Melbourne University campus and others. What do you think about those two approaches?

A: I'm thoroughly supportive of the appointment of the development worker for SCM, [as] it's been a very effective appointment and one that offers a lot of promise. I think that the Christian mission on the universities has to be ecumenically based and open in its approach in order to have a chance of effectiveness with students. There is a group of students who will want the narrowness of conservative forms of Christian formation and that's very well catered for already. But I think the good elements in that also need to be put together with your brain, and you need to bring your whole vocation as a student and as a person and as an intellectual before God. And the SCM, [along with] patterns of ecumenical chaplaincy and ministry, can support that and really make that happen, or [at least] help that to happen. So I see [it] as a commitment to ecumenical student ministry and also staff, but particularly ecumenical student ministry, and the SCM is a part of that. I would see chaplains and other people as also contributing to that, so I've got no difficulty with the Uniting Church appointing a chaplain provided that there is this ecumenical focus.

I've been at a meeting just recently in the Caulfield campus of Monash, which is not a place well endowed with students, organisations and activities. ... [There] the fact of Muslim worship presence, where they pray five times a day, is very powerful, and the Christian groups are now saying we want equal space provided for us and Christian formation. Now that's valid, [because] at that level I think Christians [do] need to claim the space in universities. But they will do that more effectively on an ecumenical basis and with an open life which is welcoming to interested seekers.

Q: So it's not just an ecumenical basis between Christian groups and denominations, it's then between all religions?

A: I think there are two levels of ecumenism today. There is the Christian ecumenism [that] needs to continue, and ... there is a real common faith that needs to be shared in an open way, [which] means learning from the differences and the different emphases. There is also an ecumenism of the spirit with all

religious people and with all people of good will, and that needs to be pursued in a more loose way and in a more affirming and forum-creating way. There needs to be a forum for that conversation and for increasing mutual understanding. People seriously misunderstand each other across those divisions, historically and today, so that the broader ecumenism is the creator of initial understandings. Don't expect too much, [or an] easy ability to co-operate, until the understanding is in place. That's the task for now, to get the understanding.

Q: What do you see the senior friends' role in all of this is for the current membership?

A: Continuing spiritual and financial support for the organisation, [along with] the willingness to be called on for presence and personal involvement in particular events where students see value in those events. Things like being ready to come on to campus to join in a worship service, [or] being ready to come in as leaders to a conference. Those ... sorts of readiesses have always been there, but I think [they] need to be kept alive and healthy and well organised.

Q: Have you thought much about what the SCM's future will be?

A: The SCM Friends need to be more active as a network in looking for ways to maintain the SCM agenda, [particularly] the ecumenical Christian ministry to the universities and to society, and to find ways to promote that and make it more public. I think that hasn't happened well in the past, [and] the senior friends [need to] do their thing. There are all sorts of political and social issues that need to be addressed, and senior friends are in a good place to organise to address them.

Q: And the churches as well, the National Council of Churches, for example?

A: The SCM's tended to hand [things] over to those bodies ... [and] work through them in the past, and that's been good. I think that this needs to continue but not as the sole agenda for SCM Friends. There ought to be a continued monitoring of what happens on National Council levels, but don't expect the National Council to do it all.

Q: Or to be directly involved with the SCM?

A: Yes. There ought to be a good link with National Council but that needs to be created and refurbished. There has been a good link with the old Australian Council of Churches, but I think the National Council of Churches and the SCM need to negotiate a new relationship.

Q: And similarly [one] with a different denominational leadership.

A: Similarly. All round there's a need for a better sense of presence in the churches, at least at an organisational level, so at least there's a relationship and a willingness to co-operate. And that needs to be worked at.

Q: Because often the SCM has been a forerunner of change, with ideas that have surfaced in the SCM later being taken on by the mainstream churches?

A: If you wrote the spiritual history of Australia as a collective, you'd be surprised at how often the SCM would show up in that role.

Q: So it's important for the churches now to support the SCM [as a counterbalance], especially given the rise of fundamentalist Christianity?

A: ... There are many in the leadership in the churches who recognise that and will be ready to support that, I think that's true. [But] the SCM's not the only place where that think-tank and initiative role comes from at all, certainly not when it's been so small and struggling. [However,] I certainly think it's one powerful place and one that is readily available.

Q: What do you think is the SCM's most important role in the broader life of Australia, not just within the church? Is it the formation of the Uniting Church, ... ecumenism?

A: [If] you're talking about particular contributions, I would say it's been more the nurturing of a creative climate, ... [and] a willingness to take action in the light of the vision that emerges. It's nurtured a climate for people to be formed in that possibility and I think people have been empowered by that. [As a result] they've gone in all sorts of directions and done all sorts of good things, [as well as] some not so good things. It's been that kind of contribution that's been most important in the past, [and] that's still what I'd see as the vision for the future, in broad terms. The important problem is how best to shape that and how to nurture it and make it happen.

Q: On a personal level, how has SCM influenced you or been valuable to you?

A: The SCM showed me how to face issues honestly [and] how to negotiate them with people who didn't agree with me. It's shown me the importance of thinking before acting and the value of acting. It's always challenged me with the unmet needs and the injustices that have not been properly addressed. ... I've always found it very supportive because there have been people there who were ready to care about me as well as about the issues. They welcomed me into a fellowship of that kind. ...

Q: Finally, what issues raised by the SCM [and its members] ... have challenged you in your time within the [organisation]?

A: There have been a number, of course, but one that comes to mind is the whole encounter with homosexuality as an issue and [with] homosexually oriented people. This was not an issue that I had any real contact with, I would say, until 1973, at least not in an overt way. [But] in 1973, ... the general impact of liberation theology and the free speaking that we were encouraging within the SCM as a forum at that time led to the emergence, firstly, of the feminist challenges, and the unaddressed elements of feminism as the SCM was then living, but also [of] significant voices from homosexually oriented people. I can remember a couple of people, particularly in 1973, who were very strong in telling us that we needed to face this issue and work out what the Christian faith really did say to them and to us about it. It's interesting how that issue is currently dividing and, some would say, stimulating the Uniting Church.

Q: Which again is that idea that the SCM can be a forerunner of issues within the church?

A: Exactly. It was in 1983 that I had to look at it first within the Uniting Church when there were candidates for ordination who were avowedly homosexual in orientation. That was debated in the Yarra Valley Presbytery at that time, and I remember studying the issue more formally in that context than I [had previously done]. It was on the run and it was only one of many issues at the time within the SCM, but we certainly were involved in meetings in which people from the emerging Christian gay activist organisations came and addressed us and talked about their experience of not being accepted into the church. And I think the outcome for SCM people was, firstly, a kind of pastoral sensitivity to the situation of these people. Secondly, [we had to take] a really

critical look at the tradition. [There was] an incredulity that we would take seriously the holiness code of the Hebrew people after the coming of Christ, [his death as an unholy criminal and his] resurrection. And I think that sort of sense of revisiting Biblical tradition with those attitudes has been important.

The SCM today is fairly committed to what you might call a liberal agenda in this matter. Perhaps it's a little bit one-sided and not ready to hear anything at all in the more conservative Christian position on that, and I think we should always be ready to listen to the positions we disagree with. But, nevertheless, the SCM has come to a very strong position on the left wing of that issue and that's, in fact, been important within the Uniting Church debates I would say.

Interview ends.