

JG

summer 2001

Stories

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C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, illustrated by Pauline Baynes.
George MacDonald, *The Light Princess and other fantasy stories*, illustrated by Craig Yoe.
J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, illustrated by Thomas Taylor.

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We thank God for the life of Dr Herbert Feith, and acknowledge with sadness his recent and tragic death. Our prayers are with his family and friends.

Theology and Story

Both the term theology and the term story have image problems. Theology is commonly understood to be an esoteric academic discipline conducted by humourless academics; beyond the understanding of, and irrelevant to, ordinary Christians. Story has the opposite problem. It is casually used as an alternative for lies, contrasted with truth and fact. Yet both theology and story are essential to the lives of Christians and each is essential to the other.

Looking theology up in the dictionary is an unnerving experience. The Oxford's first definition takes up four lines and is full of esoterica. It is no wonder that some people are scared of the subject or see it as separated from real life. But theology can be understood more simply than the dictionary definitions suggest. My favourite definition is God-Talk, although I am also drawn to St Anselm's 'faith seeking understanding'. Theology, in these terms, is that simple seeking after answers that everyone engages in. Who is God? Who am I? What is life all about? No one can go through life without asking these questions; and it is these questions that are at the heart of theology. Theology merely enables us to ask them systematically in an ongoing search for greater truth. It need not be intimidating; or, at least, not more intimidating than a search for truth always is.

While theology may be given too much reverence, stories have been given too little. Stories are an essential part of life. We understand ourselves and our world through telling stories; we create our identity through narrative; we explain our experiences to others by telling them our story. Yet stories have often been looked down upon, and compared unfavourably with facts.

And if stories are viewed askance, myths are scorned. I recently read a book called *Christian Mythmakers*.^{*} A friend, a fan of the *Narnia* series, flipped through the book and demanded to know what was wrong with C. S. Lewis, one of the subjects. She had mentally translated Christian mythmaker as someone who tells lies for God. I had to explain that mythmaker was a term of praise for people who use imagination and story to express a truth that could not be expressed in any other way.

The Scriptures are full of these myths; the creation stories in Genesis and the birth narratives in the gospels of Luke and Matthew are examples. The scientific understanding of the formation of the universe, which as far as we know is factual, does not express the idea of the creative God in the way the first chapters of Genesis, which are mythical, do. The Gospel birth narratives express truths about Jesus that go beyond fact, and reading them as factual accounts misses their point entirely.

The Christian story is the story of God's actions in the world and the story of the experience believers have of God. It includes the Christian meta-narrative that begins with creation and will be completed at the end-time; the gospel narratives of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; the Christian myths that use imagination to reach a deeper truth; the experience of Christians throughout history; our experience of God here and now. We exist as Christians within the Christian story. We understand our faith through the Christian story.

^{*} Rolland Hein, *Christian Mythmakers* (Chicago: Cornerstone Press, 1998).

What is the relation between theology, the search for the truth about God, ourselves and the world, and the Christian story, our experience of God, the core of our faith? Quite simply, one cannot exist without the other.

It is quite possible to ask questions about the meaning of life without bringing God into the discussion; or to discuss the nature of god without reference to the Christian story or the faith stories of other religions. The first is philosophy, the second is deism. Neither of these pursuits is Christian theology. Theology's quest for truth can only be conducted in the light of the Christian story. In Anselm's definition the search for understanding is based on faith. The Christian story comes first; the search for greater understanding of it, theology, follows.

Charles Williams warned of the fate that can overtake the student who asks questions theoretically without a basis of faith. In *The Place of the Lion** platonic powers or angelicals invade the world. Reason appears to the believer as an eagle, but to the student who has studied ideas without considering that they might be real it appears as a pterodactyl, dead and decaying. Theology that is not based on the Christian story is similarly dead.

Christian story may come first, but it is not sufficient. To remain at faith without seeking understanding would cause our Christianity to stagnate. We may be called to enter the Kingdom as children, but surely as intelligent, inquisitive children whose very faith is what allows them to question. A belief that does not question becomes fundamentalism, whether liberal or conservative. The fact that my temptation is to settle for God the Creator and Lover revealed through personal experience would not make my acceptance of partial answers any less moribund than the acceptance of someone who believes only in God the Ruler and Judge with the Bible as sole revelation.

God is more than we can ever understand. We will never come to the end of theological questioning, and the more we learn the more we will want to know. Theology is the task of all Christians. Living within the Christian story, we are called to improve our understanding of that story for the rest of our lives.

Avril Hannah-Jones

* Charles Williams, *The Place of the Lion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965).

C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*

There are two series of children's books that I vividly recall from my early childhood. One is the American pioneer collection of *Little House* books, by Laura Ingalls Wilder. The other is C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*.

I am certain that I remember the moment at which the lightbulb went on over my head and I recognised the crucifixion allegory in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. I was seven, possibly eight years old, and my parents and I were in the middle of reading *Prince Caspian*. Suddenly I stopped in my tracks and said to my mother, 'Aslan is Jesus, isn't he?' I think we did more discussing than reading that night.

Without question Narnia influenced the way I conceived and described my Christian faith during my childhood. For a child, trying to understand Heaven as something other than a place of harps, clouds and winged angels, the Platonic idea of Heaven as the 'Narnia within Narnia,' smaller and yet larger than the 'real' Narnia - or the real world - that yet isn't real, makes sense in a way that really isn't expressed in that sentence.

Narnia influenced more than just my image of heaven as a child. I find that even now it influences my image of God. In Narnia, the God-figure is the Emperor-Over-the-Sea, never given a more solid form or visage. That elusiveness, the inability or unwillingness of Lewis to pin down an image of God is a major influence on my thinking, and gives me courage every time I am asked my image of God. My answer is along the lines that my image of God is of a being without an image.

With Narnia such an influence on my thinking, you may be able to understand the reassurance I take from the following anecdote from Lewis' life. A young boy, Laurence, having read the first few books of the series, became concerned that he loved Aslan more than Jesus. Laurence's mother wrote to Lewis, who replied as follows (edited):

Laurence can't really love Aslan more than Jesus, for the things he loves Aslan for doing or saying are simply the things Jesus really did and said. When Laurence thinks he is loving Aslan, he is really loving Jesus: and perhaps loving Him more than he ever did before. Of course, there is one thing Aslan has that Jesus has not - the body of a lion. (But remember, if there are other worlds and they need to be saved and Christ were to save them as He would - He may really have taken all sorts of bodies in them which we don't know about.) If Laurence is bothered because the lion-body seems nicer to him than the man-body, I don't think he need be bothered at all. God knows the way a little boy's imagination works (He made it, after all) and knows that at a certain age the idea of talking and friendly animals is very attractive. So I don't think He minds if Laurence likes the lion-body. And anyway, Laurence will find as he grows older, that feeling (liking the lion-body better) will die away of itself, without his taking any trouble about it. So he needn't bother.*

In my case - and I assume in Laurence's - Lewis was right. I'm far more able now to think and talk about God and faith in general without using the Narnian allegory to

* In Lyle W. Dorset and Marjorie Lamp Meade (eds.), *C. S. Lewis: Letters to Children* (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 52.

frame my thoughts. Of course it's still useful, and I possibly should have used a reference to Narnia rather than to Star Trek in an SCM meeting earlier this year, when the Moderator of the Victorian UCA was leading a discussion on images of God and the Trinity.

Once I was aware of the allegory, back when I was seven or eight, I found that I loved the *Chronicles* even more. In a discussion with friends recently, I noted that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Last Battle* are probably my two favourites, followed closely by *The Horse and His Boy*. Though the point is almost certainly debateable, I believe that these three contain the most significant allegorical episodes of the seven books. The friends with whom I was discussing the topic preferred the less allegorical, more adventurous stories. Their choice, their loss, I guess!

Next year, I'm planning to put my love of Narnia to work, and possibly to the test. All things going according to plan, I will be writing my 12,000 word Literature Honours thesis on the female protagonists in the *Chronicles*; Lucy, Susan, Jill, Aravis and Polly. It will be a gender analysis, looking at the progression, for lack of a better word, of these characters as Lewis wrote the series. Even the greatest fans of Lewis and Narnia are forced to admit that there are some problems with Lewis' treatment of his female characters. Over and over again it is emphasised that the girls are not to fight; at the end of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, Peter and Edmund are knighted, and their brave deeds spoken of, while Susan and Lucy are only spoken of in terms of their hands being sought in marriage. Susan, of course, along with Polly Plummer, is one of the most problematic of the female protagonists. Both are consistently shown as being vain because they are female; this vanity is 'the chink in a person's armour that allows evil to enter in.'^{*}

But this is all better left until next year, when I'm actually writing my thesis. It will be an interesting year - one that I'm looking forward to spending in the literary company of these companions of my childhood.

Heidi Stabb

* Paul F. Ford, *Companion to Narnia* (New York: Harpercollins, 1994), 434.

The Harry Potter Series: beyond Quiddich towards Theology

There is little explicitly theological about the *Harry Potter* novels. They are not like C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* series: an extended allegory, intended ultimately to convert and to educate. Rowling seems to be writing stories for the sake of the story and for the sake of her readers, who were intended to be children although there is now a much wider readership. The *Potter* series have become an enormous phenomenon, and have provoked much reaction – much of it marketing exercises, Potter stuff, and re-prints of other and perhaps similar books. The *Narnia* series seems to be making a comeback, and Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* also seems to be in wider circulation.

Within the Christian and theological community there has been a range of responses.

In the mainstream theological world there has been some cautious interest and comment, mainly reassuring people that these books are 'safe' for the children, and interesting reading, containing some material worth discussing with children. At the more rabid edge, there has been some book banning in some Christian Schools, along with a range of rather odd criticism. These extreme critics read in very flat ways, and thus end up with some interpretations that give the impression that they have read or understood very little of books themselves. Quoting a character like Quirrell saying that Voldemort convinced him that 'there is neither good nor evil, but only power', as an example of the negative, destructive, anti-Christian message of the Potter books is to disastrously misread. To those who have not read the books, this

would be the equivalent of quoting Judas Iscariot and arguing that the gospel message is one of financial self-interest. It is to read out of context and against the grain of the books.*

Ultimate Powers

I think that a number of interesting things emerge from the Potter series of books, read as a whole literary creation, and attempting to read with an eye and ear out for the theological interest. The first interesting point is the lack of ultimate powers or of ultimate belief in the *Potter* books.

There are certainly some very strong figures. There are Voldemort and Dumbledore, who are central powers in the novels. However, they are both warlocks, magicians, who gain their powers slowly (and painfully), and both are limited. Dumbledore may know the truth of Harry, Hermione, and Ron's story in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, but he does not have the power to convince others, or the ability to make events come out right. In *The Goblet of Fire*, Dumbledore, with everyone else, is bound by the 'rules' of the Triwizard championship, and the binding magical contract – whatever that is – even though Potter's presence as the fourth of the three championships breaks other rules (he is underage). Dumbledore is no god, and seems mostly to be rather diffident about the power that he does have.

* By the way, if you haven't read the Potter novels, intend to, and wish to preserve the plot for yourself, maybe you had better stop reading this article now, and come back to it later. I have already ruined the key plot twist in *The Philosopher's Stone*, and will probably ruin others for you before I am done.

Voldemort is also limited in power. He is defeated by Harry Potter through the power of his parents' sacrificial love. He is defeated or at least stymied in *The Philosopher's Stone* and *The Chamber of Secrets*. Voldemort is never destroyed, but also never fully successful in achieving his aims. Voldemort is no god, although he may intend to become a one. He clearly does wish to gain power, to be the most powerful force in the wizarding world. He also wants immortality, and the two together come pretty close to being god-like (at least it seems that way to God in Genesis!). He may strive for ultimate power, but he does not have it yet (there are still three more novels to go.)

James and Lily Potter's sacrificial death holds great power – it saves Harry's life at the time of the great Voldemort attack and again later in *The Philosopher's Stone*. Is this, a sacrificial death that is salvific, setting up some christological themes? Perhaps, but only perhaps and only a little bit. James and Lily's death keeps young Harry alive, and offers him a measure of protection in his struggles against Voldemort – but this protection is limited, can be overcome by Voldemort, and only protects Harry anyway – a very weak form of a christological theme.

There seems to be no ultimate power in the novels. For all the witch and wizard trimmings, there is no worship – satanic or otherwise - in these books that are such an odd and pleasing mixture of fantasy world and school novel genres. Oddly, Christmas and Easter holidays are maintained with some of the trimmings – including the armour attempting to sing 'O come, all ye faithful,' and people receiving Easter Eggs, but the anachronism between this and the witchcraft world is not tackled at all.

There is a strong sense, amongst the good characters, that 'good' is intrinsically valuable, that love and loyalty and self-sacrifice and friendship and cleverness and skill and hard work (and I could go on) are valuable and prized. This is an important and affirming part of the books. The series is limited, however, on the 'why' question. Why are love, sacrifice, and goodness valuable, other than because they've always won so far? Or is this just a matter of preference: some characters like Harry, Hermione and Ron prefer 'good' and Malfoy and his associates prefer 'evil,' because they enjoy it?

Complexity of Characters

One of the most satisfying things about the novels to me is the complexity of the characterisations. The child characters grow up, face different issues in the different books, and their fights and misunderstandings are well portrayed, making the characters in the fantasy believable. The books are at a different reading level throughout the series (unlike most school novel series). Not only this, however, there are some genuinely complex characters. Snape is perhaps the clearest example. We know little of his story. He seems to be one of the 'bad guys,' supporting Malfoy and the Slytherins, yet he remains at Hogwarts through Voldemort's return to power. He hates Potter, yet repeatedly saves his life. He is an unattractive character, described as greasy-haired; behaves unfairly in his classroom, intimidating students and having favourites; yet he keeps the trust and support of Dumbledore and the other teachers in a way that Gilderoy Lockhart does not.

For all this growth and complexity, however, there seems to be little room in this fantasy world for profound

change. The good characters remain good, and the evil ones evil. Evil is unacceptable to the good characters and good seems to be inexplicable to the evil ones. Both sides seem to comprehend weakness – but weakness is something that so far seems to usually end up on the side of evil. Both Quirrell and Peter Pettigrew show that. Voldemort and his crowd seem to wish to overpower and dominate the weak, and the vulnerable, but seem to be trying to rule only by force, there is no serious attempt at persuasion here. There was some attempt to attract Potter to Slytherin, and the Voldemort camp, but it was never an attractive option, and was instinctively rejected by Harry.

Dumbledore and the good side don't wish to overpower or dominate, have some concern to protect the weak and the vulnerable, but do not seem to have much concern or wish to either convert the Voldemort camp, or to strengthen or empower the weak.

The lines are drawn early and clearly in the *Potter* series. Good and evil present two sides, and most of the complexity, and the difficulty, lie on the side of the good – the constraints of 'being good' are very clearly

presented. In the absence of the possibility of conversion, change of perspective, two opposing sides growing closer together, the series seems headed for the continuing and increasing clash between the two sides, with lines increasingly clearly drawn, conflict ever sharper and more destructive. In the absence of ultimate powers, thus far, I suspect that the 'why' question will be ever sharper.

Why should the good guys continue to resist Voldemort? Why does Voldemort have this insane and destructive will to power? Is this battle based on the premise of personal preference alone, and is this strong enough to carry the story and the characters through? I am looking forward to the next in the series, to see how these questions are carried forward.

Rowlings has written an excellent series so far, books that are a great deal of fun to read and to spend time revisiting for their many quirky details. There is also, I believe, much to consider in this particular portrayal of struggle between good and evil.

Morag Logan

I will tell you something about stories...They aren't just entertainment. Don't be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death. Their evil is mighty, but it can't stand up to our stories. So they try to destroy our stories, let them be confused or forgotten...Because we would be defenceless then...

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Buffy the Vampire Slayer:

Using contemporary popular culture to explore the Christian faith

As long as there have been demons, there has been the Slayer. One girl in all the world, a Chosen One, born with the strength and skill to hunt vampires and other deadly creatures, to find them where they gather and to stop the spread of their evil and the swell of their numbers.

As I grew to be a *Buffy* fan I realised that I was strongly identifying with Buffy's call and destiny as a Vampire Slayer, someone who fights evil. It reminds me of my own journey of faith, my sense of call to work for the kingdom of God, to be light in dark places, a bringer of hope to our world.

Many young people and young adults are at a point where they are beginning to make choices about how their life will be, about who they will be. I'd like to use scenes from *Buffy* to explore the idea of hearing a call to discipleship.

Call, vocation, destiny

We begin at the very beginning; the scene where Buffy first receives her destiny.

Merrick: Buffy Summers?

Buffy: Yeah! Hi. What?

Merrick: I need to speak with you.

Buffy: You're not from Bullocks, are you? Because I *meant* to pay for that lipstick.

Merrick: There is not much time. You must come with me. Your destiny awaits.

Buffy: I don't *have* a destiny. I'm destiny-free. Really.

Merrick: Yes, you have. You are the Chosen One. You alone can stop them.

Buffy: Stop who?

Merrick: The vampires.

Buffy: Huh?*

Buffy in some ways is lucky. Her call to slay vampires is very clearly brought to her by Merrick, who will be her Watcher or mentor. The call to seek God or to follow Jesus can be more or less subtle than Buffy's call.

Buffy is an electronic story. It tells, as many stories do, of the great struggle between good and evil. The gospels are people's versions of the events and meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. None of them are first-hand eyewitness accounts. They are stories of Jesus passed on by his followers. This particular story is about the calling of Matthew the tax collector:

As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." **Matthew 9:9-13.**

Buffy and Matthew are unlikely candidates, but they both answer yes to their call.

* 'Becoming Part One', written and directed by Joss Whedon.

Creation stories create identity

Buffy has its own mythology about how the world began, revealed to Buffy, Willow and Xander by Giles. Willow and Xander are just coming to terms with the existence of vampires, having been attacked by a gang of them the night before and rescued by Buffy:

This world is older than any of you know, and contrary to popular mythology, it did not begin as a paradise. For untold eons, Demons walked the earth; made it their home -- their Hell. In time [the demons] lost their purchase on this reality, and the way was made for the mortal animals. For Man. What remains of the Old Ones are vestiges: certain magicks, certain creatures.*

The creation or beginning story sets the context for Buffy's world – it helps the gang to understand who they are and what their role might be in the world.

In the same way the beginning stories and images found in the Bible help us to understand who we are as Christians, and present us with choices about who we will be in the world.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. **John 1:1-5.**

Call and response

Buffy is not alone in her quest. She has her Watcher Giles to guide and inform her, Angel to watch over her, and friends Xander and Willow (later joined by other characters) to help her. They all have stories of their own calls to follow.

Willow: Here I am, and I can do anything I want. Go to any college in the country, four or five in Europe if I want.

Buffy: Please tell me you're going somewhere with this.

Willow: Nope. I'm not going anywhere.

Buffy: UC Sunnydale?

Willow: I will be matriculating with the class of 2003.

Buffy: Are you serious?...I can't let you stay because of me.

Willow: Actually, this isn't about you. Although I'm fond, don't get me wrong. I mean, you've been fighting evil here for three years, and I've helped some. And now we're supposed to decide what we want to do with our lives, and I just realised. That's what I want to do. Fight evil, Help people. I think it's worth doing, and I don't think you do it because you have to. It's a good fight, Buffy, and I want in.†

Jesus himself told many stories to in order to illustrate ideas for people. The parable of the wedding banquet in chapter 22 of Matthew had me thinking about what is involved in being a disciple of Christ.

Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. Again he sent other slaves, saying, 'Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, while

* 'The Harvest', written by Joss Whedon, directed by John T. Kretchmen.

† 'Choices'.

the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. Then he said to their slaves, 'The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' Those gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen. **Matthew 22:1-14.**

Verse 14 really got me thinking – Many are called but few are chosen. If we relate this to God's call to us, does this mean that ultimately we have no say in who becomes a follower of Jesus? Having thought long and hard about this, I have come to this conclusion. The call or destiny cannot be fulfilled unless the person responds to the call. And the choice to respond is a continual one, a choice we make every day about the way we live our lives.

Willow choose to put aside academic career opportunities so that she could become someone who fights evil in her own right, not only as Buffy's friend. A little bit like the choice of someone who has been raised in the faith because their family were Christian and who then made a decision to be Christian for their own reasons, not anyone else's.

The cost of following the call

Much of the *Buffy* story involves Buffy's own struggle to accept her destiny as a Slayer and what this means for her personal relationships and future career. In the following scene Buffy's mother has finally learned that Buffy is a Slayer.

Joyce Summers: Honey, are you sure you're a Vampire Slayer? I mean, have you tried not being a Slayer?...

Buffy: It's just fate, Mom. I'm the Slayer. Accept it...Cops can't fight demons. I have to do it.

Joyce: Do what? Buffy, what is happening?

Buffy: Just stay out of my way.

Joyce: Don't you talk to me that way! You don't get to just dump something like this on me and pretend it's nothing...I am not letting you out of this house.

Buffy: You can't stop me.

Joyce: You walk out of this house, don't even think about coming back.*

Again and again, Buffy's destiny costs her personally. She loses friends, her romantic relationships suffer, and occasionally she finds herself on the wrong side of the law.

Every Christian disciple, at one time or another in their life, will find that their discipleship costs them something. It may be something as simple as choosing not to buy Nike products because their production involves the abuse of human rights. Or perhaps getting into trouble with the law for sheltering asylum seekers or protesting against uranium mines in national parks. A friend of mine, a pastor, recently lost his relationship with his girlfriend because he remained true to his call to be with his people while she chose to work overseas. In some extreme cases Christians have lost their lives in the course of standing for justice.

Even now, as we absorb the impact of the terrorist attacks on the US, to stand for the truth, peace, and justice will bring Christians in for criticism by others in our society. No-one wants to hear about the innocent Iraqis and South Americans who have died because of previous US

* 'Becoming Part Two', written and directed by Joss Whedon.

action. People seem to think that the answer to terrorism is greater terror and they do not acknowledge the situations of injustice that led to the rise of terrorism in the first place. Christians who talk about these situations of injustice may find themselves ostracised because of their commitment to truth and knowledge, as Buffy is ostracised by her knowledge of a deeper truth unacknowledged by the rest of her society.

Conclusion: celebrating life

An important point to make in conclusion is that while *Buffy* is mainly about fighting evil, our role as Christians is about struggling for good. Sometimes this does involve fighting the forces that would destroy life, but mostly it is about living life in abundance through relationships, working roles and community activities. In the *Buffy* world evil keeps coming, but each individual defeat of evil is to be celebrated. We are called to this celebration too.

Buffy: We saved the world. I say we party.

Xander: If there's something bad out there, we'll find, you'll slay, we'll party.

Robyn Hodge is a Regional Development Worker for the Uniting Church in Victoria. This article is a version of an elective Robyn led at the 2001 Victorian Synod.

The Magic Flute

"I am not getting in the chandelier," I said, taking off my Napoleonic hat and laying it next to my telescope.

"What are you, a wuss?" Andrew said.

"Fuck you, Andrew. The chandelier looks unsafe, I am not getting in it."

"It's OK, Davo," Kate reassured, half-eaten mars bar in one hand and bottle of coke in the other. "We will go very slowly until you are comfortable, at whatever speed and height you like. We will just take it up a little at time, and you can call the shots."

"Good. It looks pretty daunting."

"Yep, but we will go slow," she said as she gazed down at her clipboard. "I better go help the elephant. He is having trouble dancing."

I walked back to my room and sat in the piercing light.

"Do you want me to hang up your jacket? Here, pass me your hat and..." June asked.

"No thanks June, I don't think I'll be here long." I said. "The elephant will be dancing today."

"OK then, just don't go too far..."

Andrew entered the room, burped, and ripped off his pirates' scarf. "Have you seen that chandelier David?" he asked. "It looks pretty cool."

"Yeah, I saw it, Andrew."

"My Dad taught me to wrestle last night," Robert said. "He was in the Commonwealth Games. He got bronze wrestling for Australia. But he doesn't do it anymore cos he retired and was in a car crash."

"My Dad collects worms."

I walked back. A couple of people were breathing fire and juggling knives. Two men stood hugging in a corner. There was no sign of Kate. The chandelier was sitting surrounded by Persian rugs. I examined the droplets, until my eyes moved to the harness. I looked quickly around me, and opened the little, latched door.

David Wolstencroft

NCCA: The next generation

In July I attended the National Council of Churches forum as an ASCM representative with observer status. The first day was an open lecture and discussion led by Australian Social Researcher, Hugh Mackay. The next three days were the business meetings of the Networks and Commissions of the NCCA.

While an audience of mainly baby boomers listened to Hugh Mackay speak about a strange, unpredictable breed of people called 'youth', a group of SCMerS heard about ourselves and tried to make sense of the definitions and generalisations that Hugh Mackay used to describe us. Sometimes Hugh Mackay was startlingly accurate in telling us about ourselves. At other times, we were alarmed to hear drastic misinterpretations of our behaviour. According to Hugh Mackay:

We are the options generation. We are more interested in informal networking than we are in rigid procedure. We spend more time communicating with each other than any previous generation via email, chat sites, mobile telephones. We are intensely tribal and yearn for a sense of belonging. We tolerate a high degree of eccentricity. We are very confused about God, and very vague in our attempts to explain what we believe. We are open to almost any suggestion of religion or spirituality. We tolerate society's expectations only to the level that we understand them and find them reasonable. We are coming to the end of the era of individualism and entering the era of communalism. We have watched our parents' generation cling to the institution of marriage, but we scoff at formal institutions; we care for the value of a relationship, and will not sustain an institution for its own sake. We will not enter into relationships too deeply. We are afraid of becoming too involved. Many of us will live alone, despite our need for connectedness. We will seek communal connectedness in other places. We are signposts of the world to come.

While I can't objectively study my own behaviour or reactions, I tried to put what Hugh Mackay said into context during the following three days of the NCCA National Forum.

The National Council of Churches is an amazing and visionary institution. To sit, for the first time, and pray with people from Anglican, Antiochian Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Assyrian Church of the East, Catholic, Churches of Christ, Congregational Federation, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Romanian Orthodox, Salvation Army, Society of Friends, Syrian Orthodox and Uniting Church traditions is to glimpse a united church with a single vision of following Christ and serving God to bring peace and justice to the world. It places daily parish life in the context of a wider, exciting, growing movement that is gaining momentum across Australia and throughout the world.

We are intensely tribal and yearn for a sense of belonging.

The challenges involved in bringing Churches to work together became apparent as the meetings progressed. Opinions which I had taken for granted no longer seemed so clear when several alternative and valid conflicting views were being offered. During the Aboriginal and Islander Commission, discussion turned to the inclusion of indigenous spirituality in Christian worship. To members of some traditions this would seem natural and appropriate; to others, it bordered on heresy. How to proceed? Eventually, a resolution was passed that encouraged member churches to 'express the Gospel in ways which recognise and respect Indigenous spirituality', with one member Church abstaining from the decision. That the NCCA could come to any decision on this issue is progressive and exciting. However, the willingness of the forum to accept 'virtual consensus' on issues where one of the smaller member churches dissented or abstained was problematic and seemed to ridicule the romantic notion of consensus decision making.

We care for the value of a relationship, and will not sustain an institution for its own sake.

In his article 'New Ecumenical Structures: An Australian Experiment,' Rev. David Gill, General Secretary of the NCCA, began by thanking God that the ecumenical movement is far greater than the structures which from time to time are created to serve it. Structure is clearly important - without structure, chaos rules, and smaller voices will not be heard. Most of the creative planning at the NCCA forum took place during meal times, outside the formal meeting framework. Business meetings seemed to be hushed and restrained.

We are more interested in informal networking than we are in rigid procedure.

The creativity and freedom of meal times will, accidentally or otherwise, invade the sensible space of the forum. It is an exciting and frightening prospect. Over lunch one day the youth delegates hatched a plan to invade the forum space and rearrange the seating into concurrent circles. The heads of churches and the General Secretary and the President and the delegates and the young people and the observers would all be linked into the same circle. It was a tiny step, and we realised that there wasn't actually enough space for the rearrangement. We weren't trying to propose an answer. We were trying to say that we couldn't relate to the formalised structure.

We tolerate society's expectations only to the level that we understand them and find them reasonable.

The National Council of Churches clearly values young people and their input. It was evident that when a young person spoke the forum listened and often acted on suggestions. When the Uniting Church on behalf of the ASCM proposed a resolution 'That the member churches of the NCCA support ecumenical tertiary ministry as a high priority of the churches' ministries in order that future generations might believe (John 17:21),' the resolution was passed enthusiastically and without further discussion. Speaking to this resolution, I was able to bring a call from the ASCM to the NCCA to continue its work toward greater unity in order to:

- live out the fundamental calling of Christians to unity;
- develop specialisation in research in order to speak more effectively to the community on matters of social justice;
- respond cohesively to youth issues (such as suicide and spiritual identity) and;
- develop peer networks and ecumenical leadership among young people.

Yet ecumenical youth organisations such as the NCCA Youth Network and the ASCM are drastically under-funded. There is token youth representation on some of the NCCA Commissions and Networks, but there are no structures in place to ensure that young people receive adequate mentoring and support in their roles, or to ensure that the youth voice is heard. Young people are the future of the church, and the ecumenical vision will be theirs to carry forward to the next generation. It would seem that investing in tertiary ministry, youth training, and the development of ecumenical youth programs is a vital role for the NCCA.

The ASCM, and indeed the ecumenical movement, need prophets who can dream about who and what we might be, who can be visionary about where the movements might travel. We also need creative organisers who can take our changing society and mould those visions into something accessible to a generation who are not comfortable with regular commitments; who will not tolerate layers of structure that they do not understand; who are more interested in the value of their relationships with the movement and within the movement than with the framework of the movement. We need to be able to fulfil this generation's searching for community and sense of belonging. Too often the Church can only offer young people traditions from last millennium and bureaucracy from last century with no sense of the actual spirituality from which those traditions grew and for which they are searching. During the

NCCA Youth Network's presentation, I was asked about my vision for the future. I responded:

My vision for the future is for a just and equal society. The Church will be a unified, integrated body that will speak out about matters of injustice and proclaim the Gospel to the world. The Church will value its young people, both for their intrinsic, youthful creativity and energy, and for the future church that they will become.

My vision for the future of the ASCM is that it will be well staffed and well resourced so that it might continue to expand its ministry to include students from all of the many university campuses around Australia. Through its own programs and those in conjunction with other SCMs and the WSCF in the region and the world, the ASCM will continue to play a key role in the formation of ecumenical leaders of all kinds, both organisation and prophetic.

Claire Vincent

ASCM Around the Country

SCM is winding down for the year. Here is some news from around the country. SCM is active in all mainland states and established branches exist in WA, Vic, ACT and Qld. SCM Development Workers are generously supported by Friends of the SCM and the Anglican and Uniting Churches in four states. The Acting National Secretary is supported by the donations of Friends. Please prayerfully support these workers as they shape and are shaped by the values of the students and staff with whom they come in contact.

Western Australia

UWA. Of a potential 35 students, branch meetings attract an average of 3-4 people. Development worker Trudi Bennett is exploring alternative models of community to the branch model. Shared space gatherings and dinners attract a core group of 7-8. Trudi is working on an ecumenical youth network with the Conference of Churches in WA. Trudi is an Anglican chaplain and SCM staff and is supported by the Anglican Diocese of Perth, St Margaret's Anglican parish, Nedlands and Trinity UCA. There is interest among some of the students to develop a refugee emergency house near Curtin Uni. (See Trudi's report on page 22 for more details.)

South Australia

Julia Pitman has stimulated SCM activity with a recent inter-faith dialogue on 27 September at the Union Hall jointly hosted by SCM and the Islamic Students of Adelaide and the University of South Australia. Rev Sean Gilbert from the UCA and Nurudeen Lemu from the Nigerian Education Trust spoke on the two faiths and discussion afterwards was warm. Approximately 200 staff and students attended. The Women's Theology Group participated in Reclaim the Night on 26 October, a march against violence against women. Further events are planned including a quiz night to help Abi Thonemann, a member of the women's theology group and member of Belair UCA, to participate in the UCA's exchange program with indigenous communities, About FACE 5. There will also be a dinner in November to raise awareness of the Christmas Bowl and rally support for the South Australian Council of Churches Badge Day in December.

Victoria

Victorian SCM was recently refreshed by a branch retreat and in August sponsored a great debate entitled 'Trouble in the Triangle'. In this event, which attracted a crowd of 100 people,

Chris Mostert and Ian Fry went head to head over the role of the Trinity in interfaith relations. Jenny Hayes will finish as Victorian Development Worker for SCM at the end of December. Victorian SCM is resorting to the old model of staff worker in which a student will be employed to focus on the development of Melbourne branch. Victorian SCM has been funded by the Uniting Church Victorian Synod BOMAR Fund which was due to expire at the end of this year. At the recent synod meeting a question from the floor stimulated action to reinstate funding. In terms of future events, a leadership retreat will be held in December.

ACT

ACT boasts a very active Area Council and a branch at ANU where about 15 students are regularly involved in SCM. The semester program has focussed on theology and contemporary events such as refugees and the war in Afghanistan. Canberra City UCA funds SCM staff, Catholic Ruth Hagan, one day a week. A highlight of the semester was the SCM day of prayer where a workshop on worship was held and SCM worship material produced. Lorraine Gatehouse an Aboriginal nun spoke on "Worshipping God with all our mind. Dinners will be held with SCM Friend Marilyn Lay. (See Ruth's report on page 23 for more details.)

Queensland

In addition to a branch at UQ, Queensland SCM holds coffee nights and dinner parties to discuss theology in the movies. In Qld, Anglican Deacon and part time chaplain Marilyn Cullen supports SCM as development worker for a small honorarium. Marilyn will finish as development worker at the end of the year.

National

Julia Pitman is Acting National Secretary three days a week and provides impetus to local movement building in South Australia. ASCM maintains national projects and conferences. The recent conference in Melbourne in July was timed to coincide with the National Council of Churches Forum. In addition to participating in the conference, ASCM was very ably represented at the Forum by Claire Vincent, from the Melbourne Branch. Claire has been selected to represent the ASCM on the NCCA Youth Network. ASCM maintains national student and friends email lists as well as the national magazine *Jubilee Grapevine*. This year coordination of this publication has been faithfully maintained by Melbourne Branch.

International

ASCM is also involved in the life of the international arm of SCM, the World Student Christian Federation. ASCMers serve in WSCF forums and as members of WSCF committees. Edwina Hunter was recently re-elected Vice Chairperson of the Region and Sophia Wooldridge to the Regional Women's Committee. Rachael Osmond, ASCM National Treasurer, recently attended the Student Empowerment for Leadership Formation Conference in Thailand and represented ASCM at the Regional Committee of the WSCF Asia Pacific Region. The ASCM executive has formally endorsed Rachel Anderson from Tasmania, studying an undergraduate degree in environmental science, to attend an ecology conference in Taiwan during October and Annabel Dulhunty, a third year Arts/Theology student, to attend a gender conference in November. WSCF conferences provide an opportunity for students who would not otherwise afford overseas travel to meet Christians from around the region, experience alternative tourism and develop leadership and theological skills in an Asian context. Your support helps ASCM pay for part of the airfare for these participants.

Julia Pitman, Acting National Secretary

From the Chair

Greetings from the Acting Chair! With a title like this, I feel a bit like a player in theatresports - and almost as frantic!

My main focus over the last month or so, and into the next few months through JGC, is working with Julia Pitman (Acting National Secretary) to facilitate conversation about the future staffing model for the national movement. This question is, of course, closely tied to our vision of where the movement is heading in the medium term as well as to some hard economic realities.

Thanks to the generous donations of many Friends, we have a large capital base available. Yet with interest rates so low, it doesn't generate the kind of income we anticipated when we set up the Centenary Trust Fund in 1996. Even with the Friends' annual contributions to the current expenses of the movement, there isn't enough income to fund a full time (or even 20 hours/week) National Secretary.

At the same time, the movement is genuinely struggling in many parts of the country. We continue to have great faith in our potential, yet we know we need support.

Two quite different kinds of responses have emerged, both of which are being discussed by the National Executive and the whole movement in the lead up to January General Committee. One is to continue running a deficit budget in order to employ a full-time, professional National Secretary. Such a person could, over the course of three to five years, engage in significant fundraising and movement-building activities as well as providing stability, focus and leadership.

The other approach, which has generated considerable interest among the National Executive, is to decentralise the key tasks of the national movement into the hands of volunteers. Each volunteer would be responsible for one task over a period of years in return for an honorarium, much as John Brown currently is with the database of members and Friends. This model should free up some funds to support state-based staff work where there was no local funding for Development Workers. There are a number of questions about how this model would work, and whether it meets our needs, which will be explored over the coming months.

One thing that strikes me about both approaches - one suggested initially by the Victorian Area Council, the other by the ACT - is the faith that they each express. In the first case, there is a deep faith that if we focus on rebuilding the current movement, in a spirit of abundance rather than scarcity of resources, God will provide. We may not know exactly how, but we won't hoard our money away for a future generation of SCMerS that might not, if we were to hold back, come to be. And in the meantime, that we can pray confidently for a candidate who can fill the critical central role with passion, skill and commitment.

The other model places great faith in the ASCM community, including its many Friends, to rise to the call of the current movement. It emphasises local movement building and fundraising, drawing on our talents and our love for the movement. And in adopting such a model, we would dare to believe that, while the current number of branches and active student leaders may be small, the ASCM will nevertheless be around for many years to come, and would take responsibility to provide what we can for those future generations by preserving our investments.

Please continue to pray for the ASCM at this critical time of decision-making. If you would like to contribute to our thinking about the staffing model, a number of discussion papers are available on the ASCM website with further information.

Yours in Christ,

Shawn Whelan, Acting National Chairperson

The Capitalist Fairy Land of the Betrothed

As some of you know, about 8 weeks ago my partner Matthew Lamont and I decided to get married. When we started telling ourselves and others that we were going to marry we were sucked into a parallel universe, a non-negotiable crazy land. Unfortunately we are still looking for a way back, even though people around us are urging us to look for a way forward. But how can a psychologist and a social worker move on without examining, labelling, and analysing all these new emotions and experiences? The fairy-land of the betrothed does not allow time for much self reflection. We may have begun this process feeling calm and confident, but our nearest and dearest wouldn't have a bar of that. Let me share with you a random sample of the events that have made an impact:

On 8.9.01 I wrote:

'We only made this decision about 17 hours ago. I am living in a strange twilight zone. Sometimes I'm stunned and I just sit and stare. Sometimes I'm really excited and I jump up and down a lot. Sometimes I get teary because I'm happy. Sometimes I have a moment of being absolutely shit scared of the whole thing, and I look at Matt and say "Fuck! What are we doing!" It's an absolute head spin.

Matt and I had started to talk about marriage a few months ago, and we booked ourselves into a Kinway marriage preparation workshop. We started arguing over lunch about various things. Then I started crying and crying and crying. Matt said he didn't want to go back to the course if I was upset. We parked the car near an ugly little park in South Perth.... After we argued for a while I got this strange thought: I will NOT ask him to marry me while sitting in the front of a car. That would be uncouth, and it's not a good story to tell the grandkids. This thought scared me so much I felt compelled to get out of the car to get away from where the thought had come from. More fool I.

So we walked to the top of a hill, and we were watching lots of little kids slide down a hill on pieces of cardboard. It was scary, and so I stood there and prayed and said, "God what do you want me to do? Is this my pride wanting me to do this? Is this desire of mine an evil incarnation of the patriarchy? Is this some torrid small-town-country-girl-safety-net strategy? Or is this really what you want me to do?" Then I got a strange but undeniable sense that this was it, it was crunch time, and we should just get on with it. It was a feeling of a solid push forward from the inside. It wasn't a safe feeling. It was like being pushed into risk. So I said "Will you marry me?" and he said "Yes". Then there was a strange silence, and I said "Really?" and he said "Yes really." Then we both made the same noise that was a cross between crying and laughing. And I said "FUUUUUUCK! We're getting married!"

Then the anarchy really started.... Since then I've been calling people up. Screaming at them. Jumping up and down. And sometimes feeling absolutely terrified. This morning I woke up at 2 am, and then woke Matt up to ask him whether or not he wanted to back out of the whole engagement idea. I just phoned Matt up at home to ask him the same question again. I can't believe he said yes. The scared shitless feeling comes over me in waves, then it goes again. Then I get a bit teary and think this is astounding I can't believe this is happening.'

Not long after I wrote this I spoke to a cousin who said, "You've been engaged for 17 hours? You would be up to the terrified-what-have-I-done bit by now."

"How did he ask you?"

Almost everyone asked me this. I loved this question. I loved saying "He didn't. I asked him. And I still can't believe he said yes."

“I can't talk you out of it, can I?”

For the first few days, telling people we were getting married was a sport for me. I loved watching people's faces, and hearing them screech. Responses ranged from stunned silence to joyous shouting to “I can't talk you out of it, can I?” (from a sincere feminist divorced friend). I could not understand why Matt was not as engrossed in this new sport as I was. I deduced that this must be because he didn't really want to get married after all. Very logical. We were just starting to get on top of this dispute when some planes were flown into the Trade Towers (4 days after Our Big Decision). Out of respect for the dead, I took a whole day off from telling people My Big News. Never let it be said that I am not sensitive.

Notices in the Paper

I had thought that my parents would place a notice in the local paper at Harden to announce this Big News. I urged them to at least make it funny, something like “Barry and Kerry Wooldridge are stunned and relieved to announce that blah, blah, blah.” However, no such notice was placed. Mum said that Dad is boycotting the local paper after having a very public dispute with the management about grammatical errors and advertising content. You can take the man out of the school principal position, but you can't take the school principal out of the man.

On 25.9.01 I wrote:

‘The last few weeks (it has now been 18 days since we decided to get married) have been a ROLLERCOASTER of emotions. For a lot of the time I've been very excited. At other times I've felt absolutely terrified. I've had nightmares. I've had teary conversations with friends in other countries (“Am I doing the right thing?”). I've eaten a lot and also drunk quite a bit of alcohol. That part of it has been good. I've had many full-on conversations with Matt about everything from child-raising techniques to the menu for the wedding reception to where we are going to live for the rest of our lives. For the last year I have been suppressing day-dreams about my wedding and associated carry-on. Now that we are actually engaged and I have full permission to plan and scheme a wedding, I have to make myself think about it.’

“Picking the dress is the best bit of the whole thing!”

About four weeks after we decided to get married, my friend gave me some bridal magazines that she had used when she got married in 1999. She demonstrated the skills required to harness the power of bridal magazines: start from the beginning; turn the pages quickly; scan the photos of pretty ladies in strange dresses; and if you see a dress you like, fold the corner down to mark the page. These magazines have about 300 dresses in each, and so I tired of this exercise quickly and I confessed to my friend that I didn't care about The Dress. She looked horrified, and said “You've got to pick the dress. You can't plan the wedding until you pick the dress. Picking the dress is the best bit of the whole thing.”

Being realistic

About three weeks after our decision, Matt and I made up separate lists of people who absolutely had to be invited to the wedding or we would die. Matt had 51 people on his list. I had 116. This was not a good start. I was also reliably informed that most wedding and reception venues in Sydney are booked up more than 12 months in advance. Our hopes for a quick painless quasi-engagement period were fading fast. My Mum's solution was to get married in Harden. At this point, dead bodies were mentioned.

“Where is The Ring?”

I have never wanted an engagement ring. I've seen women in my hometown with rings with rocks lined up almost to their first finger joint, all gold with big sparkly bits. I'm sure I would just lose an engagement ring in the garden. Some women seemed horrified by this. “What do

you mean you don't want a ring? You've GOT to get a ring! How can you not want a ring?" The straight men I spoke to about this were impressed. One said "I wouldn't want an engagement ring either. They look silly." He said this very quietly, out of earshot of his substantially bejewelled wife.

"Nanna is praying for you"

It was only a few weeks into our pre-marriage period (I don't like the term engagement. It reminds me of a rugby scrum, and they always end in tears) when the Wedding Hullabaloo began. First we had Matt's parents' response to the news that we wanted to get married in Sydney rather than Perth (quiet, polite befuddlement). Then my parents realised that having a Catholic priest at our wedding was not a foregone conclusion and the Hullabaloo shifted up a gear.

I don't know why I didn't anticipate their reaction to this. I had thought that after telling them for 7 years about my involvement in ASCM and my thoughts on ecumenism, they would know that having a Catholic priest run my wedding was not a top priority for me. This is a touchy issue for my parents and for me, and I am trying to be tactful. My parents and I have now begun a process of negotiation. I've told them if they expect our wedding to be some weirdo far-out freaky event, they will actually be disappointed by how moderate the content of the service will be. I've told them that Matt and I are committed to having a sincere, honest and Christian service. But this does not cut it with my parents. We have had about four conversations about it so far. My mother would like me to agree to have a priest at the service no matter what. I have not given her that guarantee, so she has now gone for the big artillery. Two days ago she told me that my Nanna was saying extra rosaries to get Matt and I to change our mind and have a priest at the wedding. Nanna is a Big Gun when it comes to prayer. She looks placid and harmless on the outside, but she gets results.

When I told Matt that Nanna was praying that we would have a Catholic priest at our wedding, he was angry. "Why doesn't she pray that we can find our own path together, or that we have a good life together?" I thought about how prayer is used in Catholicism, and the nuances of prayer as a form of social pressure in my family. I thought about the mock-pious look that would have been on my Nanna's face when she said "Tell them I'll be praying for them to make The Right Choice", and how that meaning is lost in a phone call from 3000 km away. What can I say to Matt? "You have much to learn, Young Jedi. Much to learn, you have."

There are many stories from The Capitalist Fairy Land of the Betrothed. These have been only some of them. Matt and I are committed to surviving this circus with our ethics and sense of humour intact. Here's hoping.....

Sophia Wooldridge, National Women's Project Coordinator

WA

It's been a year of ups and downs here in the west but we have seem to survived the big transition period if only just. UWA was the only branch operating this year looking at a different aspects of Faith and Social Justice in first semester and Simple Living in second semester. With a membership of 16 people it was unfortunate that the free lunch hour was abolished this year so most could not make it.

We've been looking at some different models of being community this year. A very energising group has evolved called Shared Space where 7-10 students and young friends meet once a month at someone's house to share a meal and have a student lead discussion. So far we've had discussions on Images and Experiences of God, Prayer, and Non-violence. This looks to be a promising model to build community and to connect people from different universities.

For the future things seem quite promising. Next year the Curtin branch will be back up and running with a new core group and a social justice project taking on an emergency house for refugees. A group is starting to come together for Murdoch and we'll be able to have a fresh start at UWA. For the first time (in recent history) we'll be running an intercampus Orientation Camp and BBQ, to recruit new members and introduce them to the rest of the SCM community. We're also looking at broadening the SCM reach by starting an Ecumenical Youth Network with the Conference of Churches in WA.

I would dearly like to thank Mark Baumgarten especially for his support over the last couple of years and also Narelle McAuliffe for her commitment to SCM. Both these wonderful members will be graduating at the end of this year and becoming young friends.

Trudi Bennet, WA Development Worker

ACT

Well, the fluff is falling at the ANU (although not as abundantly as it usually is, I think) which is a sure sign that end of year exams are descending upon us. (The fluff is actually seed pods from a certain tree contained within a cotton wool-like substance that aids dispersal of the seeds.) Local legend has it that if you haven't started studying by the first fall of the fluff you're going to fail.

The SCM Day of Prayer was definitely a highlight for the ANU branch this semester, and for ACT SCM. We decided that we needed to adapt the service to give it a little more of an Australian feel and relevance. So we included a reading on Wisdom from Proverbs, a Leunig prayer and a Blessing written by Dorothy McRae MacMahon. We also opted out of some of the hymns in favour of some Taize chants. Students and Friends also prepared some additional intercessory prayers that were more relevant to our part of the world and our concerns. A number of SCM students and Friends led the music at the service and an ANU Branch member, Fiona Brideoake, led the service.

Daniel Robinson, David Harman, Christian Rau and myself recently attended a multi-faith service hosted by the Muslim Students and the ANU Chaplaincy last Thursday. It was well worth attending, and a great opportunity to meet and show support for some of our fellow (Muslim) students.

Lunchtime meetings (Thursdays at noon, ANU chaplaincy) have continued through the semester. In recent weeks we've been discussing some of the issues around refugees (with some useful material from the National Council of Churches), and the repercussions of the events in the US. Daniel Robinson shared some interesting facts with us on Australia's refugee policy - including the "contribution" that Pauline Hanson has made directly to government policy! Fiona Brideoake also shared with us highlights of a Radio National programme on a Theology, Philosophy and Science workshop held in Grafton very recently.

Our last lunchtime meeting for the year provided an opportunity for us to meditate and then reflect creatively (through the creation of a mandala) on the opportunities that Spring brings for renewal of the Spirit and Soul.

On the evening of Thursday, October 25th, ANU SCM branch members gathered for a short time of communal prayer followed by a shared buffet-style meal. It was a great opportunity to celebrate our year as a branch and a community and to give thanks for the blessings of new friendships and some good times together.

Some of us went on to a forum on refugees organised by the ACT Council of Churches at City Uniting Church. The turnout for that was terrific - a packed church with at least 400-500 people there.

A joint Students and Friends end-of-year/Christmas dinner is planned for early December at the home of an SCM Friend, John Ball.

All in all, SCM in the ACT has lots of energy. The wonderful support of the Students and Branch-work by the Friends in the ACT certainly needs to be acknowledged.

Ruth Hagan, ACT Development Worker

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