



Jubilee Grapevine

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Warm Welcome to JG Spring 2022

Robbie Tulip

Warm greetings to all our readers, to all friends, supporters and members of the Australian Student Christian Movement, and to all SCMs across the World Student Christian Federation.

Thank you for reading Jubilee Grapevine. This issue features the work of the World Student Christian Federation, from its General Assembly in Berlin this year. Despite many challenges, the WSCF family have grounds for optimism and hope. Our faith is a vital vision of inspiration for the world, shared across the wonderful global family of SCMs, approaching the story of Jesus Christ as inspiration for the many ethical and moral problems we face.



Building ASCM partnership and solidarity across the WSCF has established friendships over many years that continue to engage with needs of the current generation of students, building ecumenical solidarity as our core moral challenge.

WSCF held its General Assembly in Berlin in June, its first in-person meeting since 2015. Reports from the Assembly are a feature of this issue of JG. The theme of the Assembly was *Rejoice in Hope*, taken from Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. So many countries face much worse circumstances than most Australians, so this theme, finding a visionary path forward through faith in Christ, has incredible power and meaning to inspire our cooperation.

As part of our work with WSCF, this issue of JG also has a report on ASCM's partnership with Bangladesh SCM. There are summaries of several online discussions, a report from a talk by Brian Howe AO, and more.

What are our problems in Australia? ASCM is in a difficult space, with not much student involvement. We find it hard to build interest in ecumenical work on universities.

Christianity has a conservative public reputation that does not appeal to most students today. The combination of old-fashioned views on sexuality with notorious sexual scandals gives the church a hypocritical and confused image.

ASCM presents a challenge to the dominant conservative view of Christianity in Australia, but ours is a distinctly minority view that struggles to gain visibility, even while we try to hold to a rigorous ethical theology. ASCM has not been able to transmit a vision of Christian faith to many current students. There are few active ASCM groups meeting on campus. And the decline of Christianity means churches are not really interested in organising on an ecumenical basis in universities. However, small groups of SCMs continue to meet around Australia, with students among them, and Christianity flourishes best during adversity, as the early church - when numbers were small - showed.

The identity of ASCM as the Australian affiliate of WSCF offers a significant unique feature, inviting students to reflect on the meaning of Christianity as a global movement of solidarity with the excluded. These international connections through WSCF give ASCM an inherent direction that we can cultivate and grow, while we work to build an audience for the broad SCM vision among Australian students.

It seems the SCM concept of a critical and ecumenical Christianity makes little sense to most young Australians, or to most churches. Why might this be? The reputation of Christianity is terrible, with the church widely seen as obsolete, delusional and reactionary. There is little cultural oxygen for efforts to redeem the church through a transformed vision that aligns with modern priorities.

Much of the problem resides within the churches themselves. They are beset by traditional inertia that is hostile to dialogue with modern thinking. When Jesus criticises the Judaism of his day for presenting a whitewashed public face while concealing its internal rot ([Matthew 23:27](#)), we can ask if the same problem applies to much of Christianity today.

Conventional belief and ritual should remain central to Christian faith, but these established practices can usefully be interpreted in new ways. The problem arises when the emotional comfort of traditional approaches neglects what Jesus called "the weightier matters of the law – justice, mercy and faith" ([Matthew 23:23](#)). Jesus says these complex transformative values are needed to augment charity, echoing [Amos 5:21-24](#).

A superficial and unchallenging approach is sometimes more attractive to churchgoers than the dangerous excitement and risk of a faith that is true to the Gospel. And yet a reformed modern Christianity has immense potential to engage with the big challenges facing us through cohesive visions for ethics, society and climate. There is so much in the Bible that calls us to an integrated and authentic ethical vision.



Since its inception 127 years ago, the WSCF has sought to take a critical and enlightened approach to Christian faith, often provoking conflict with established churches. I hope the ASCM can encourage young Australians to enter conversation about how the great stories of the Gospel provide a foundation for the transformation of the world.

In other concerns, the proposed referendum to establish an Indigenous Voice to Parliament is a profound call for Australia to recognise and respect Indigenous identity and culture, on a journey of healing toward reconciliation. Please see our first story, *Dare To Remember*, about Australia's concealed history, reflecting ASCM's abiding concern for Indigenous people.

If you would like to write for Jubilee Grapevine please let me know. Most of this issue is written by me, with just one other contribution. ASCM are eager to hear a diversity of voices, encouraging dialogue and exchange of opinions.

In Christ
Robbie Tulip

Indigenous Acknowledgement

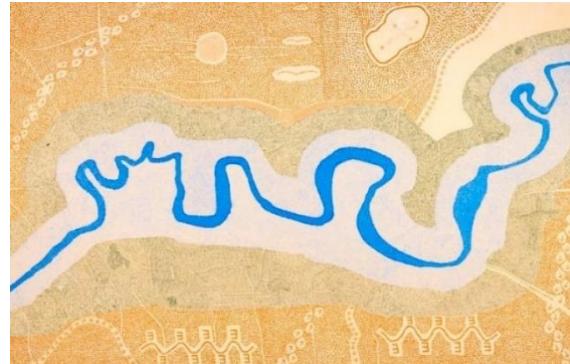
The Australian Student Christian Movement acknowledges Indigenous Australians and the suffering and sorrow and silencing they continue to experience. We express respect for Indigenous elders past present and emerging, and stand in solidarity with the call for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

DARE TO REMEMBER – Dr Ray Barracough

[So That We Remember](#) is an online project to deepen awareness of Australian history and its violent past. Please visit *So That We Remember* at

<https://www.sothatweremember.com.au>

[So That We Remember](#) seeks to make a distinctive contribution to an awareness of Australian Indigenous history. It is run by



Healthy River, Healthy Country - The Baarka River at Wilcannia, from <https://www.glenloughrey.com/>

ASCM Senior Friend Dr Ray Barracough and Glenn Loughrey, a noted Indigenous artist and a Wiradjuri man. Glenn is also an Anglican priest in Melbourne Diocese.

[So That We Remember](#) aims to expand awareness of the cost to Indigenous lives of the process of colonial dispossession. The website contains excerpts from the writings of contemporary Australian historians, as well as artwork by Glenn, aiming to fill out the picture in a patchwork of memories of the violent dispossession of Australia's Indigenous people.

[So That We Remember](#) is offered as a verbal and visual path on a journey that began 234 years ago with the arrival of the First Fleet from Britain. These memories aim to expand awareness of the cost to Indigenous lives of the process of colonial dispossession.

This collection is enhanced by the beautiful paintings from Indigenous artist Glenn Loughrey. The visual has the capacity, beyond the verbal, to take the viewer into the primal feel of a landscape, an event, an encounter.

This collection of extracts from primary historical sources, and from historians seeking to gather as accurately as possible the memories of Australian history since 1788, is prompted by the felt need to expand the reach of memory into the wider Australian public.

What comes into view is a miscellany of testimonies, eye-witness accounts, secondary stories, justifications and obfuscations in regard to the nation-wide violence entailed in the imperial colonisation of this continent and its islands.



This collection takes the viewer into a day-to-day remembering. Whether we are an individual, a family, a clan or a nation, we remember selectively. Both what we remember (and what we allow to be forgotten) shape the memories that shape us.

[So That We Remember](#) aims to bring to public awareness the cost in losing lives and in losing country that has affected Australia's Indigenous people to this present day. That awareness can find expression in remembrance.

Contact [So That We Remember](#) at
raybarracough@icloud.com
twitter.com/RayBarracough3

The Australian Wars



[The Australian Wars](#) is a three-part SBS television documentary available free to view in Australia at the link below. It tells the story of Australia's first wars, calling for the nation to acknowledge the First Peoples who died in these conflicts and for the Australian War Memorial to recognise them. Episode One covers the early history of the British invasion. Episode Two tells how European immigration increases in Tasmania alongside the death count as Aboriginal people resist occupation and colonists encroach on the best land. Episode Three is about the history and methods of massacre across Northern Australia. Please watch this important documentary series.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/tv-series/the-australian-wars>



Native Mounted Police with Snider Enfield rifles at Coen, North Queensland, c. 1896.
From Queensland Police Museum

WSCF Asia-Pacific Region Indigenous People's Seminar

This WSCF seminar in November 2021 featured Nathan Tyson, Indigenous Coordinator for the Uniting Church in NSW/ACT, with speakers from Bangladesh, Taiwan and Indonesia. You can watch it at <https://www.facebook.com/WSCFAP/videos/1004608806751705/>

A Reconciliation Pilgrimage

From 24 to 31 July, a desert pilgrimage group walked along the oldest river on earth, the Finke in Central Australia, known in Arrernte language as Larapinta, or Salty River. We were there to mark the centenary of the death of Lutheran missionary Carl Strehlow and to celebrate his achievements in supporting and documenting the living culture and language of the Arrernte people. [Read more](#)





ASCM and the World Student Christian Federation

Robbie Tulip

The World Student Christian Federation is a remarkable organisation, though now little known in Australia. WSCF has a rich history and heritage within the ecumenical movement and in connection to broader social movements. Its mission is to bring people around the world together in the ecumenical vision of Christ ‘that they may all be one’ ([John 17:21](#)).

The Australian Student Christian Movement is the Australian affiliate of WSCF. The WSCF international network helps Christian students to consider matters of social conscience and justice from diverse Christian faith perspectives around the world. Linking to WSCF is at the core of the mission and calling of the ASCM, as a major focus to support the spirit of ecumenism in universities, bringing people together in dialogue to build shared understanding, recognition and respect.

Recent issues of Jubilee Grapevine available at the [ASCM Website](#) have published some great stories about WSCF people. Rev David Gill wrote about his close friendship over decades with Rev Philip Potter, former head of the World Council of Churches. David explained that the WCC has welcomed WSCF as the ‘church ahead of the church’, able to raise important questions for church and society. JG has also featured conversations with WSCF leaders from Ireland, Lebanon and Italy. Rev Sandy Yule provided a short history of WSCF from his perspective as general secretary of ASCM in the 1970s.

This year, ASCM helped WSCF to arrange a theological conversation between members of Christian Students Uniting at the University of Sydney and SCMs in Cuba and Mexico. A guided Bible study of Acts 15, the Council at Jerusalem, involved three stages – responding to the text as a group, listening to how the Latin Americans responded, and finally a

conversation between the two groups, exploring cultural differences in interpretation. Participants commented that it was an amazing experience.

SCM members Andika Mongilala and Robbie Tulip went to the WSCF Assembly in Berlin in June this year. The Assembly was a highly successful event, with a few highlights in the following articles.

The WSCF General Assembly

The WSCF General Assembly was the first in-person meeting of WSCF for seven years since the last GA in Bogota in 2015. GA is meant to happen every four years, so the Berlin meeting was a celebration of coming back together. The Bible theme for the Assembly was “Rejoice in Hope” from [Romans 12:12](#), where Paul tells us to be patient through suffering and persist in prayer. While in Berlin I kept a journal at <https://rtulip.net/blog/> and have drawn from this record for the articles here.

Stories of Memory and Resistance

The Berlin Assembly of WSCF began with stories of memory and resistance from delegates. These stories reflect how our faith in the transformation of the world through the love of God offers a profound source of hope amidst immense difficulties. The experiences that people shared were heartbreakingly, illustrating how Christian solidarity faces severe challenges around the world, with many terrible situations not widely known. Please pray for people suffering oppression and persecution around the world.

A delegate from Palestine SCM described coming to Berlin and seeing the history of division and control represented by the Berlin Wall, now fallen for 33 years. She said seeing the wall fallen brought a lump to her throat, comparing the historical removal of this barrier to the ongoing reality in Palestine of a settler apartheid system with the suffering it inflicts on the Palestinian people. The





opportunity to discuss such problems in WSCF creates the hope of ecumenical solidarity of the world, with the inspiring vision of the liberation of East Germany.

Since the Assembly I have worn a cross given to me there by Yasmina Rishmawi of Palestine SCM, inscribed with [Romans 8:28](#) 'God works for the good of those who love him'. The WSCF Statement in Solidarity with Palestine is [here](#). Our prayers are with Palestine.

While in Berlin, I made this [video of a remaining section of the wall, covered with art on the eastern side](#), and wrote [this commentary about the Wall](#).



From Sudan, the Assembly heard about political suffering since the army took power, with most Sudanese against the [2021 military coup](#). Daily protests are met by shooting. Ethnic disputes affect Christian minorities, with protesters arrested and tortured. The Christian Coptic community find it difficult to worship and be involved as community. Our prayers are with Sudan.

In Peru, Arahucas and Ashankinka are indigenous Amazon people who were enslaved by colonial powers to grow rubber. The Assembly heard how an armed conflict from 1980 to 2000 brought these communities into conflict with terrorists and

drug traffickers and land thieves. Indigenous people were denigrated as uncivilised but have maintained land for centuries. They now have no government protection against murder. Resistance is hope. Our prayers are with all indigenous people.

Ukraine is the biggest story of resistance and hope today. We are all connected, and - wondering when events will hit us. The Assembly heard from a Ukraine SCM member about Cherniyev, a city in northern Ukraine, where old churches are used as place of hiding, and come under artillery assault. Many children have been killed, and buildings

destroyed. In Kherson, occupied for months, farm produce was rotting. Farmers were dumping food, with no way to export, and food stolen by Russia. The invasion is causing global hunger, economic crisis and ecological disaster. Zaporizhzhia, the 6th biggest nuclear station in the world, has been occupied by Russia, with risk of explosion. What we do matters, and we need to raise awareness. As Russia launches constant rockets, people cannot sleep. Who if not me? Our prayers are with Ukraine.

The Myanmar SCM secretary shared a video greeting, apologising for not being able to attend the GA due to the impact of the 2021 military coup, with many students fleeing or arrested. SCM in Myanmar cannot do programs, with no zoom access or internet. They invite WSCF to pray for them and provide advice. Our prayers are with Myanmar.

As we share these stories of heartbreak, raising awareness of war and violence, the global WSCF family can reach out in prayer, sharing information around our networks.



The whole world is in pain and is globally connected. Showing interest means a lot.

Comments from Rev Chris Ferguson

Reverend Chris Ferguson is pastor and adviser to WSCF. He commented on these stories of



Chris Ferguson (centre) at World Council of Churches Assembly ([source](#))

memory and resistance, saying what is happening in one country is happening to us all.

Abstract connections at global and regional levels

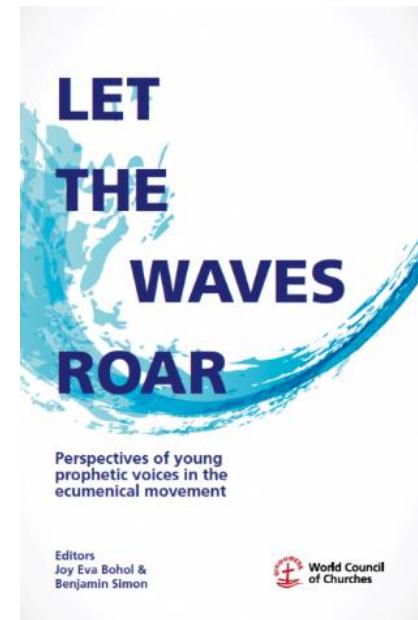
show how strongly our present world disorder shapes and determines local reality. Power structures are interconnected across the whole world, showing the need for ecumenical identity. The word ecumenical comes from the ancient Greek oikoumene (οἰκουμένη), meaning the whole inhabited earth. οἰκουμένη was used after the conquest of the eastern Mediterranean region by Alexander of Macedon to describe the reality of a world under imperial domination.

Rev Ferguson said the whole creation is groaning, as Paul wrote in [Romans 8:22](#). Structures and systems are living under domination, falling captive and wounded. The world that God created in love faces the common global reality that we are fallen among thieves. Our struggles are rooted in the common dynamics of 'necropolitics', the colonial control of life, deciding who will live and who will die. Everything we do is guided by a sense of planet under threat. The stories we have heard shine light on captivity under empire. In Ukraine, the Russian invasion reflects conflict between empires. Taiwan is at risk in the context of global empires. Amidst bad news, the Gospel call to repent and believe wakes us to say the God of life comes in the midst of a broken and wounded world.

Racism and gender injustice live out differently in each place. Injustices together add to create a social, political and military system of global apartheid. The few live at the expense of the many. Hope motivates us to show solidarity and calls us to name the world as it is, in constant alert. Rev Ferguson called us to see that WSCF is called through conflict to understand the whole world, joining in common humanity. Young people are disappointed, depressed and despairing, not hopeful, and yet can find hope in the Gospel story. In an objectively hopeless situation, [the Palestine Kairos document](#) describes how faith can provide hope.

Let The Waves Roar

Joy Eva Bohol, leader of youth engagement with the World Council of Churches based in Geneva, spoke to the WSCF Assembly, describing responses to justice issues around the world.



[Let the Waves](#)

[Roar](#) is a WCC book of essays co-edited by Joy Bohol, affirming

prophetic voices to disrupt oppressive systems, [available free online](#). Its 17 authors from all around the developing world include Yasmina Rishmawi of Palestine SCM, whose essay is titled *The Clash of Identities of The Palestinian Christian Youth and its Impediments on Their Engagement in the Ecumenical Movement*.

Young people are the hope of the future, but they face eco-anxiety, with chronic fear of environmental doom. Children are more informed than their parents think. Climate change is occurring against intersecting issues



of gender, hate, race, systemic injustice, military, war and conflict. Creating hope for all generations to move toward a just and sustainable future, means older people must be accountable.

Indigenous people find hope in the midst of struggle, bringing back culture, language and heritage, affirming agency to speak truth to power, reclaiming ancestral rights and indigenous wisdom to combat climate change. Global solidarity is needed to expose and pressure governments and companies. We still believe in hope. Stories of struggle create change, rooted in justice and peace. The blessing of God lives deep in our hearts, bringing anger at exploitation, tears for suffering. We reach out to comfort others, rejoicing in the hope that we are led by the spirit of God to transform the world.

WSCF has provided essential courageous leadership for the WCC. We pause to consider and name stories of issues we confront, in the context of efforts to build community. Reflecting in prayer, we mourn extra-judicial killings in Philippines. Sami people in the Arctic region face the impact of green colonialism, at the cost of indigenous traditions. Wind turbines are forcing out Sami people and animals, creating an exhausting fight to defend ancestral livelihoods. The pain and hopelessness of systemic injustice puts young people at risk of exclusion, in politics, churches and community organisations.

Joy Bohol noted that half the people of the world are under the age of 30 but are discouraged from engaging. There is a lack of decision-making spaces, despite positive potential. Intergenerational mistrust has seen young people become more politically active to address structural issues, finding platforms to share with ecumenical partners.

Marcelo Leites, WSCF General Secretary - Assembly speech summary

Marcelo was appointed as WSCF General Secretary in July 2021, after work for some years as Regional Secretary for Latin America and the Caribbean. He is from Uruguay and lives in Buenos Aires.



After seven years since the last WSCF Assembly in Bogota in 2015, and several postponements, we are finally here, together at this joyous occasion! The dark times of pandemic have marked our lives, creating formidable challenges to organise the General Assembly. We offer humble thanksgiving to God that we have been able to come together today.

The Bogota mandate responded to the WSCF crisis of finance and the need to reform our structure, mission, vision, governance, communications, leadership roles and capacity, trust and fundraising.

A Transition Team and budget were approved in 2015. We created working groups on finance, governance, meetings and strategic planning. We paid off the \$200k debt to the World Council of Churches in 2015. Our staff took a 50% salary cut and General Secretary Necta Montes relocated to Manila. We



emphasised prudent financial control, regular reporting and improved senior friend relations.

The WSCF strategic plan maximises points of intersection between key concerns such as ecology, identity, diversity and dialogue, Middle East focus, and denouncing injustice and hate speech. Our new Strategic Plan will be taken forward in Berlin.

Our priorities are organisational arrangements, partner dialogue and new alliances. WSCF has huge potential at the forefront of the ecumenical movement, building on new leadership and the General Assembly as a learning platform. New WSCF Chair Bishop George and vice chairs were appointed in 2021.

The global strategic plan encourages a sense of belonging, integrating all six interconnected regions in a single family, with the same shared objectives. We can foster credible relationships and efficient systems, actively working to create alliances for funds and partnerships as a basis to mobilise resources. We are building on the strong historical relationship with the World Council of Churches (WCC), including by [attending the WCC General Assembly](#), and working with the [ACT Alliance](#) to integrate with Protestant humanitarian aid agencies. WSCF want to become a full member of ACT Alliance, for crisis response. Other WSCF partnerships include [Religions For Peace](#), the [International Conference of NGOs](#) with UN status, renewed [ECOSOC](#) status, and links to [UNFCCC](#), [Human Rights Council](#), [UNDP](#), [UN for Youth](#), and [UN Population Fund](#).

Recognising WSCF's current status, we need to think critically to reorganise. We are called to serve in the context of the pandemic,

responding to the global economic crisis where billions are left out for the benefit of a few. Realities of our context include ongoing discrimination, right wing rebellion, the loss of belief in church, how people are now seen as digital products, and the seventeen active armed conflicts around the world.

WSCF is seeking to consolidate as the largest diverse ecumenical organisation for youth in



WSCF members at the 11th General Assembly of the WCC

the world. Our new strategic plan will support our operational model with stronger governance to deliver a prophetic voice, embracing change and working together to address barriers. The national movements of WSCF come together in a federative covenant through our interregional structure, challenging churches, civil society and governments as young people ask how to be community, how we define our mission and vision, how we express ecumenical solidarity for transformation.

WSCF has huge potential in the ecumenical youth context. By addressing the problems of social sustainability, WSCF can define its identity as a basis for strong growth. As we work to strengthen networks and structures, we are developing student leadership to articulate the local and global context, positioning WSCF as a critical and prophetic voice for young people in the ecumenical world. As a place where the voice of youth can be raised and heard, we are identifying key areas of focus for intergenerational agreement. We participate in global



discussions of advocacy, training and alliances to support youth mobilisation, and need to make these links even stronger. Major areas of concern where WSCF is seeking to influence the public sphere are climate, violence, inequality, fundamentalism, poverty and marginalisation.

Thursdays in Black – Confronting Gender-based Violence

(From the WSCF Website)

“There is a dire need to continually engage church leaders and society at large on how domestic violence can be reduced and brought under control. “Thursdays in Black” should continue to address and remind us of these problems, especially in the developing countries where gender-based violence prevails more”, said Mrs. Ebere Ubesie, National President, Student Christian Movement of Nigeria (SCM).

Gender-based violence is a tragic reality in every country. Fearing stigma, victims are often silent and violence is frequently hidden. According to World Health Organisation, globally, 30% of women experience physical abuse or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. The violence can exacerbate public health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. ([more](#))



ASCM Partnership with Bangladesh SCM



ASCM has a partnership of dialogue and cooperation with the SCM of Bangladesh. We are excited to build this opportunity as part of our links with Student Christian Movements around the world through the WSCF. There is so much we can learn from nations like Bangladesh where the SCM vision is much more active than in Australia, and where faith is not so corrupted by prosperity.

Bangladesh SCM was founded in 1957 and has more than 500 student members and 150 active senior friends, with ten branches. This high level of involvement seems remarkable in a nation where only about one person in every three hundred is Christian. Of the Bangladesh total population of 150 million, half a million are Christian. This minority status gives the Christian communities of Bangladesh a distinct religious identity, and supports the central SCM emphasis on the Gospel values of peace, justice and faith.

Bangladesh SCM has a high level of local activity, coordinated at national level. The financial crisis of WSCF caused the unfortunate loss of funding support. ASCM were able to help meet this need. We see support for active partner movements in our region as a great way to build our networks, and encourage our readers to provide targeted funding donations for our partner SCMs.

Priority areas for Bangladesh SCM include Biblical reflections, actions and discussions on



current issues. Themes including peace-making, reducing religious conflict and extremism, environmental justice, gender equality, violence against women, ecumenism, solidarity, humanitarian concern and rights of the excluded.

Here is the current program of planned activities recently shared with ASCM

- Workshop on Environmental justice with fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people
- Seminar on global warming and Disaster Preparation
- Discussion session on Eco-Feminism
- Biblical reflection on Eco-Justice and climate change and today's world
- Tree plantation
- Human chain on to protect the environment
- Voices from the ground: standing up for human rights
- Monthly Bible study and SCM orientation
- Spiritual Development Workshop
- Session on mental health, depression and stress management
- Access to resources and opportunities including economic participation and decision-making;
- Valuing different behaviours, aspirations and needs equally, regardless of gender.
- Rights of LGBTQI Community
- Being aware of the contextual reality of pluralism and ecumenical leadership
- Capacity Building workshop
- Workshop on cultural movement
- Capacity building initiatives
- Bible study and SCM orientation
- Initiatives for motivated SCM members

ASCM congratulates Bangladesh SCM and especially general secretary Monica Biswas for their effective work. We pray for the success of the program and look forward to being able to work together. We welcome donations to ASCM that we can forward to Bangladesh SCM.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/bangladeshscm/> provides updates on Bangladesh SCM.

John R. Mott, founder of the WSCF



WSCF founder John Mott won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946, in a time of massive global tumult and disruption as the western nations shifted focus from the war against fascism to the Cold War against the Soviet Union. There must have been many candidates for the Peace Prize as the world emerged from such bloody and stupid fighting, carnage and genocide. To give this uniquely celebrated and distinguished prize to a man who focused on how the beliefs of university students can affect world politics demonstrates a remarkable insight and vision from the Nobel Committee.

Mott's most famous book, published in 1900, was *The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation*. It presents a theory of Christianity that was motivating and inspiring for the missionary movement of his time but is now widely considered obsolete. Advocating "the sublime purpose of enthroning Jesus Christ as King among all nations and races of men", his key goal was religious conversion of people from their ancestral faiths to an acceptance of Christianity as the sole truth. Even granting that Mott included women in his concept of "all men", his entire concept of proselytising in order to win souls for Christ is now widely



seen as quaint, rude, ignorant and offensive. And yet Mott was able to redeem this dubious goal with a high intellectual purpose that has in large measure stood the test of time. His rational principle was that knowledge must go before acceptance, that we need a coherent understanding before we can properly assent to any proposition.

Today we should apply the moral lens of questioning all our assumptions against evidence and logic. It is clear that many claims that Mott regarded as knowledge are better understood as culturally conditioned beliefs, open to challenge and dispute. Alleged facts about Jesus Christ may still retain a power to transform the world, but primarily as imaginative poetic symbols of a moral vision, not as literal reports of miraculous events in history.

Mott set out the principles that faith must be intelligible and systematic. These approaches today involve a rigorous analysis of supernatural claims that Christian missionaries of Mott's day never thought to challenge. Accepting this shift of interpretation to a critical rather than a dogmatic approach can help the church to enter constructive dialogue with a wide range of partners. A more humble approach can address the suspicion that Christianity has an arrogant agenda to replace the diverse cultural heritage of other societies with conformity to a western colonial model.

This more humble and constructive approach is reflected in [Mott's Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech](#), where he pits the constructive forces of the world against the destructive, in ways that retain a strong and vital validity. Mott calls for wise, unselfish, and determined guides to wage war against ignorance, poverty, disease, strife, and sin. This is a high moral vision of planetary transformation, where the story of Jesus Christ as the perfect man offers great inspiration, regardless of how much of the Gospel story is historically true. In a

remarkably astute comment, Mott says the fostering of right international relations faces many subtle and baffling misunderstandings, with resultant strife and working at cross-purposes.

Addressing these basic problems require that people change their motives and dispositions. The problem, Mott told his Nobel audience in Oslo, is that alarming divisive forces of economic

imperialism, commercial exploitation and the unjust use of natural resources have been accomplishing deadly work on an overwhelmingly extensive scale. How true this remains today!

Recognising this powerful material and political barrier to the needed psychological and spiritual changes, Mott said the battle between construction and destruction requires us to restudy, rethink, restate, revise and, where necessary, revolutionize programs and plans. Just acting on a perspective that is not fully thought through cannot succeed. Creative leadership is about new ideas, about spiritual discovery, about the culture of the soul, a vision that sees what the crowd does not see, taking in a wider sweep. With guiding principles that are trusted like the North Star, we can find the real secret of leadership in bewildering conditions. In a world where separation and competition are growing, Mott poses the challenge that the future greatness and influence of a nation can be measured by its ability to cooperate with other nations. Security comes through relationships, not through barriers.

The visionary insight from John Mott that peace is all about cooperation places dialogue, respect and human dignity at the focus. These are ideas that seem simple but in fact are neglected by the isolating forces that dominate our culture today. The calling of the WSCF is to bring young people together in a spirit of enquiry and sharing. This opens the direct challenge of how we can cooperate in practice. Building constructive relationships is where the framework of WSCF



is so essential, helping people to see that their concerns are widely supported, and that together we can transform the world to realise the high ideals of love, justice, peace and truth.

Message of WSCF Berlin Assembly

Robbie Tulip

The World Student Christian Federation message from its 37th General Assembly is at <https://www.wscf.ch/37th-ga-2022-berlin/assembly-resources/reports-messages/message-of-the-37th-ga-of-the-wscf>

I want to draw attention to some points in this document.

The opening idea that Christian faith has a central place in bringing people together for peace and justice is highly controversial, but reflects the longstanding political theology of WSCF. This theology is later described in the Assembly message as “an inclusive and liberating Christian faith grounded in critical Biblical reflection.” This theory of faith sees Jesus Christ as a model for how to confront the evil of the world through a vision that integrates faith, peace and justice. The Australian Student Christian Movement used to have a T Shirt with the slogan ‘faith, peace and justice’. A communist friend of mine commented that two out of three ain’t bad, reflecting broad secular suspicions of the virtue of faith.

The message describes the Assembly theme *Rejoice In Hope* from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans (verse 12:12) as expressing “the unique and necessary prophetic role of the Federation in proclaiming a positive message of the loving presence of God among us, often in difficult times.” WSCF is indeed unique as a global university student organisation focused on liberation theology, seen as a positive vision of the benefits of religion in the world. There is obviously great

controversy as to what constitutes prophecy, and the WSCF line tends to focus on the need for economic transformation toward greater equality and justice. Speaking of ‘the loving presence of God’ is a form of language that many people find hard to relate to, in a world where God seems absent. I view God as the orderly conditions for human flourishing, based on the evolutionary ethical idea that our God is our highest goal. This supports the Biblical call in The Lord’s Prayer for the will to make heaven on earth. The task of systematic theology is to construct a theory of God that coheres with the underlying durable ethics of the Bible while also being consistent with modern scientific knowledge, and therefore achieves a workable theory of change from the current situation toward the desired conditions for life. This evolutionary approach to faith challenges the traditional Christian story that God is a person with intentions, rather seeing God as love as a better description of divinity. At a time when many people feel despair at the state of the world, the idea that a transformed Christian faith can be a source of hope creates resilience in leadership.

The first hand accounts of oppression and war from students living in Ukraine, Myanmar, Peru, Palestine, Sudan and others were a powerful part of the WSCF Assembly, helping to show how human solidarity is central to authentic Christian faith, outlined in the article above on memory and resistance. The WSCF Assembly themes were Democracy, Human Rights, Fundamentalism, Peacebuilding, Climate and Economic Justice, and Gender Justice - Identity, Difference, and Dialogue. I attended the Climate and Economic Justice discussions, where I explained my view that climate change requires direct planetary cooling as an urgent world security imperative, through a policy shift from cutting emissions to increasing albedo as the main priority. This political line on climate has scientific and economic support but is not yet much advocated in public forums, so awareness of the reasoning and evidence for it is low. The discussions on identity, difference and dialogue engaged with the problem that churches in the Middle



East and Africa face strong legal and cultural constraints around discussion of sexuality. The assaults on democracy and human rights now occurring in many countries are of deep central concern to the WSCF call for solidarity with the excluded. Engaging on fundamentalism reflects the WSCF commitment to critical theology, through compassionate engagement with how the comforting expression of literal Christian faith often causes social problems when it distorts the gospel message.

Spiritual Formation in Local Faith Communities

A Whole-Person, Prompt-Card Approach

A conversation between Associate Professor Rev Dr Neil Pembroke and David Hale of ASCM on 4 May 2022, available to watch at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pxhC8WRWaQ>

Professor Pembroke wrote the book *Spiritual Formation in Local Faith Communities* with four co-authors. The book explains that spiritual formation in our local churches is too often poorly done or is virtually non-existent, but is desperately needed. The link between pastoral care and spiritual formation links the spiritual, the psychological and the moral, uniting us in a wholistic way with a structured approach.

Neil was prompted to thinking about spiritual formation by reading the books of Rev Eugene Peterson, author of the widely used Bible paraphrase *The Message*. In his [books](#) on Pastoral Ministry, Rev Peterson criticises the church for often wrongly treating parishioners as consumers, with church programs packaged up to meet desires and needs. He says instead that Ministry is a calling to be a person of prayer, to read scripture and give spiritual direction, and contrasts this vocation with the consumerist model of the church as like a shop. Neil was shocked by this insight

as he had taken for granted his training as a 'ministerial shopkeeper', even if that is not how he would have described himself.

During his theological training, Neil did a survey on meeting community needs. A program-driven church can be a busy active church, but may not be the most authentic. Finding another way inspired his thinking about other ways to do ministry. Neil



SPIRITUAL FORMATION in LOCAL FAITH COMMUNITIES

A Whole-Person, Prompt-Card Approach

Neil Pembroke • Ewan Kelly
Theo Pleizier • William S. Schmidt
Jan-Albert van den Berg



discussed a book on spiritual direction by Barry and Connolly, that he found had a troubling separation between spiritual direction and other ministry. The problem is that it is hypocritical to separate moral issues from spiritual formation. A wholistic approach is needed for ministry. Neil laid out those ideas in a [book](#) titled *Moving Toward Spiritual Maturity – Psychological Contemplative Challenges in Christian Living*.

Other scholars are thinking about these ideas in pastoral theology. [Don Browning](#) and many others are integrating moral and psychological concerns as the context for counselling, and showing how spiritual pilgrimage can help to



cope with grief and loss, to renew and heal. [William Spohn](#), theological ethicist, said training in moral virtue is closely linked to spirituality, promoting a wholistic approach to ministry and spiritual formation. You cannot neatly separate personal psychology from morality. They leak into each other. Interpersonal dynamics link to what is right and true and good. Spiritual prayer and worship are equally connected.

The model of local spiritual formation developed by Rev Dr Pembroke involves sessions with a minister to work intensively with a person over six weeks, either individually or in a small group. The prompt cards used in the book are used to spark deep reflection and shape potentially life-transforming conversations with a pastor around spiritual practices, spiritual character, personal and social ethics, and emotional well-being. The model was trialled in five countries. The authors heard time and time again how the six-week process fired a passion to go deeper with Christ. Some reported praying regularly for the first time in decades. Others found the Scriptures coming alive after years of “going through the motions.” In this book, the authors present a simple but powerful method and offer in-depth theological reflection on related issues. Some of the important areas covered are early church approaches to spiritual formation, contemporary spiritual practices, spiritual character, the indissoluble link between spirituality and moral virtue, the spirituality of the pastor, and the positive psychology approach.

For example, one card looked at Sabbath-keeping as a way to celebrate being, in the midst of a world of doing. Spiritual practice can help us find time to just be with God, reflecting and contemplating deeper questions in prayer, led by God to explore. Or the theme of solidarity can invite us to consider how we link to other people, helping others to live with dignity and rights. A few cards are chosen as the basis for discussion in each week. That ideally leads to journaling, to reflect in writing on feelings, concerns and

observations arising to help integrate moral and spiritual life.

Churches in Australia are often lacking in spiritual formation. It is hard to sustain time for parishioners. There needs to be a change of priorities. While many people would not be interested, many would. This process is often greeted with enthusiasm, leading to deeper spiritual practice and calling, as a transforming gift. Pastoral care often seems to be dead in churches, against new priorities of mission. Needs have not declined, in view of existential crises. The disease of specialisation confronts the wholistic quality of spiritual formation. A whole person approach is needed.

Many people worry they lack the education to participate, that formation is only for elite Christians. This is not true. It holds people back from participating. Asking people to take a step leads to great things. Non-directed, non-judgemental encouragement can be very effective. Groups of parishioners can keep this process going, although it is often hard to get people to open up. Classic virtues are often new concepts for people, such as solidarity with the oppressed.

Brian Howe, A Methodist Minister in Politics

Brian Howe AO was Deputy Prime Minister to Bob Hawke and Paul Keating and a longstanding friend and supporter of the ASCM. Brian was the Chair of the Melbourne University SCM in 1960, and a very important leader for that branch. He has been an active senior friend ever since, with a significant influence on the thinking of all he has engaged with.

This is a summary of a talk that Brian gave at the Church of All Nations, Melbourne, on Sunday 14 August 2022. His high achievements show how it is possible to bring



a passion for social justice into the top levels of government, underpinning the value of dignity of all.

Brian studied theology in Chicago in the 1960s while his wife Renate did a PhD there. Studies in community organisation and theology in the US helped his spiritual formation. The distinguished US theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was a great influence ([see article](#)). Niebuhr was a Christian realist, with his anti-communist support for containment of the USSR in US foreign policy.

Niebuhr had a close relationship with Martin Luther King, built around their shared emphasis on moral power in politics.

Mahatma Gandhi was a model for King's spiritual way of operating. King changed the direction of US history by working to heal divisions on race. The foundation of this work was his theological background.

Religion and life are often thought of as unrelated and separate, but faith is about moving mountains, being part of a movement for

change. The spirit of King emerged at an important point in US history.

Back in Australia, Brian became parish minister at Eltham Methodist Church. The Henderson enquiry issued its report on Poverty in Australia in 1975. New thinking about Australian society shifted from the British tradition to recognise indigenous owners, and bringing together ethnic groups that had never seen much in common.

Building the movement to see Australia as a multicultural society was a more sophisticated



ASCM Webinar with Brian Howe AO Has The Secular University Lost its Way? Sunday 4 December 2022, 4pm AEDT

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/81762120234?pwd=Qjk2SnkyTW9HVDVQVGN5eWpQODIGZz09>

model than the US melting point, enabling cultures to retain their distinct identities.

Brian entered Federal Parliament in 1977 after a hotly contested preselection had involved speaking to 13 Labor Party branches to build support for his candidacy. The Whitlam dismissal had truncated social policy, not just welfare but everything to do with the wellbeing of people living in society. Brian had six years in parliament before entering government in 1983 in the first Hawke Ministry. Hawke and Keating took on tough economic challenges, bad news for a spending minister with focus on welfare. Brian's first ministerial portfolio was Defence Support, where he was seen as a pacifist. Defence factories were a mess, producing things that were not needed. Industry protectionism preserved the past rather than building the future, an essential lesson.

Promoted to Cabinet in 1984, Brian became Minister for Social Security, responsible for one third of the federal budget. A social policy group was convened with academics to discuss priorities, such as how to spend social security funds more efficiently. He saw paternalist and judgemental policies that

treated people as less than citizens as a problem with the system, and advocated a strong sense of social rights, through policies such as

integration of tax and social security to create a guaranteed minimum income. A social security review produced papers on families with children, sole parents, unemployed, retirement, workforce, disabled, etc, linked to Paul Keating's proposal for a national superannuation scheme. Reforms included a focus on equity, responsibility and reducing poverty, through higher payments to lower income families and women. Politics makes ideals hard to translate into action.

Reforms to bring an integrated payment system supported the most disadvantaged.



Australian spending on families was highest among OECD countries. Brian worked on these issues with Justice John Fogarty of the Family Court, and former SCMer Dr Meredith Edwards. Reforms included payments by non-custodial parents integrating tax collection and welfare system payment. This was an important measure, widely seen as impossible, and lacking strong public support due to public stigma for sole parents.

Australians today don't recognise how important previous governments were in building the human rights agenda. It is a disgrace that we have no statement of fundamental rights. At the formation of the United Nations, Australian Foreign Minister Herb Evatt dominated the conference. Evatt appeared in headlines in the New York Times and was hugely responsible for the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). Evatt's departmental secretary John Burton was son of the President of the Methodist Church in Australia.

The inequality of Aboriginal people is based on their never being counted, and therefore lacking the same rights and opportunities as other Australians.

As Minister for health, housing and community, Brian continued to champion social reforms into the 1990s, such as a strategic leadership role for national mental health policy, reform to Medicare, capital funding and community health care, and the need for general practice to have a broader context in primary health care and preventive health. Calls for dental health increased funding originated in a strategy paper in 1992 that recommended a low-income national dental program. The Building Better Cities program facilitating good planning and equity. With the private sector not providing enough affordable housing, there is ongoing need to mobilise the finance sector to provide housing for low income people, but important reforms were not enacted.

Strong values are essential for policy priorities. Governments have to ask the right

people and find interesting ideas. It is criminal to marginalise the public service, through reviews separate from departments. The system relies on a strong public service. A spirit of enquiry, with best policy minds, is essential for national future. Politics has privatised decision making with very bad news. A social housing strategy is needed to reverse the declining stock of private rental. Superannuation has trillions of dollars and should invest in community and social housing.

Proud of achievements, lot more to be done.

What is Truth?

Robbie Tulip

I have been pondering why I have such an interest in religion. All my life my primary commitment has been to understanding truth. That led me to refuse to attend religious instruction classes at school, because even as a child I rejected the dogmatic method that promotes claims that contradict common sense. One of my favourite lines in the Bible is John 8:32 where Jesus Christ says "the truth will set you free." Conventionally, the church has taken a dogmatic interpretation of this line, asserting that truth is encapsulated in Christian creeds and that freedom consists in assent to established doctrine, with salvation acquired by conversion from false to true belief. The cultural clash between faith and reason resulting from this view pits obedience to traditional religious authority against the logic of experience and observation in the scientific method.

My reading of John 8:32 begins from the view that Jesus stands on the side of reason and science in this intellectual debate. Truth is contestable, since as even the great Protestant reformer John Calvin argued in a pre-scientific age, if the evidence of our senses reveals that a claim is false, we should not assert it is literally true. [Calvin's call](#) that we should "let the world become our school if



we rightly desire to know God" means the starting point of systematic knowledge, and therefore of systematic theology, should be the reliability of scientific truth.

And yet, there is a whole further dimension of truth that is not captured by objective data. The truth that sets us free answers the question of how human life connects to reality in a system of relationships. Calvin saw scripture as a prism that enables us to decipher the mind of God written in the book of Nature, a guide to interpreting the meaning and value of empirical facts in terms of relationship. This theme of connection in relationship opens the problem of the meaning of religion, inviting us to see spiritual faith as a psychological process that can ground our life together in a vision of how we connect to our actual context. And our context is the stable reality of the natural universe. As Plato taught, our constructed world of culture is often a deceptive shadowy appearance rather than a reliable truth. The truth that brings liberation is a mystery, extending beyond our conscious knowledge to connect us in ways we do not explicitly see.

This is all rather abstract and general, but seeing spiritual truth as a path of liberation in this way calls us to question the reliability of received wisdom, and instead to constantly assess our cultural values against evidence, to find what Jesus suggests in John 14:6 is the way of life in truth. One of the greatest moral teachings in the Gospels is that human salvation requires an ethic of universal love, overcoming tribal and national barriers to celebrate the shared humanity of all. The problem is that this messianic teaching confronts strongly hardwired instincts in our brains which have evolved over the millions of years of our clan-based ancestry. Our natural instincts are tribal, teaching us to trust our friends and relatives and be suspicious of everyone else. Loyalty, belonging to a group, provides instinctive protection. We face constant pressure from our tribal instincts to assent to the truth of appearance rather than questioning its connection to reality.

My view of the Gospels is that the story of Jesus totally challenges our tribal values, calling all of humanity to use our minds to evolve into a new universal spiritual identity. Naturally, the resistance to this cultural evolutionary step is immense. This cultural resistance sheds light on the whole story of the crucifixion, that mutation into 'homo universalis' is unacceptable to conventional opinion. Jesus says our salvation comes through an ethic of unconditional love, but this seems too risky and difficult for our dominant political and cultural ideas of security and stability.

So instead, the church has constructed an elaborate imaginarium in which salvation is defined as escaping nature into heaven after death, rather than in the Biblical terms of the transformation of the world of corruption to accord with the divine values of grace. The church largely accepts the corrupt values of tribal identity, kicking the subversive divine values of messianic transformation upstairs into the too-hard basket. Transformation requires sacrifice and invites persecution, as seen in the story of the cross.

Looking at church history against these ideas, we can see the constant pressure to accept tribal hierarchy as the basis of our moral values. And yet this ethic of deference is something the Gospels tell us is inadequate and dangerous, like the broad and easy road to destruction described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:13). Paul wrote in Romans 8 that escaping our bondage to corruption is like the pain of a woman giving birth, opening the way to what he called the glorious liberty of the children of God, imagined as a social transformation of the world.

A key theme in Christian theology is that humanity has fallen from an original state of grace into a state of corruption. The profound irony in this perceived loss of divine blessing is that the dominant theology of the church is itself deeply corrupted by the tribal values of hierarchical patriarchal monotheism. Biblical teachings have been adapted to meet worldly



needs, accepting comforting and convenient emotional fantasies. And yet the exciting and inspiring message of Christ is that love will save the world. This message of divine love stands hidden in plain sight as offering a rigorous and confronting vision of transforming liberation, the truth that will set us free.

The opening sermon at the WSCF Assembly was presented by Rev Peter Ciaccio, a Waldensian Methodist Minister from Italy, about the Tree of Life. Peter focussed on the strongly urban nature of Christian faith, and how this creates a series of tensions and dilemmas. Modern life is not primarily agricultural. We have jumped from Eden to the supermarket, via towns and cities. In the Biblical myth of Genesis 4:17, the first murderer, Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, also founded the first city, named after his son Enoch, in the Land of Nod. Peter described this story as symbolising a debate between rural and urban visions of human flourishing.

I find this all fascinating in a broader historical sense, showing how Biblical analysis can place prominent cultural stories into an accurate historical framework. In this case social pressures were produced by the emergence of agriculture, metal, writing and cities, as Neolithic technologies that would overwhelm the ancient hunter-gatherer nomadic lifestyle from Palaeolithic times. These pressures of technological change provide context for the story of Cain and Abel. It is telling that Cain was described in Gen 4 as a tiller of the soil, representing the settled agriculture that enabled cities, while his murdered brother Abel was a herder, suggesting the older nomadic culture that was largely destroyed by the technological productivity of emerging urban civilization with its cohesive mass religion.

This all plays into some quite profound theological concerns that have long exercised me regarding the underlying meaning of Biblical myths. Cities flourished because of having what [Genesis 4:15](#) calls “the mark of Cain”, which the Bible says meant anyone

who killed Cain would receive sevenfold vengeance. That is exactly how urban civilizations treated their nomadic precursors, extending into modern colonial times with the European conquerors of the rest of the world using their technological productivity to inflict genocidal retaliation against indigenous resistance to theft of their land.

The Mark of Cain, according to [Gen 4:14](#), meant Cain could no longer see God. The curse of Cain (Gen 4:10) from killing his brother was that the earth cried out against him. Cain’s power of technology came at the price of spiritual death, gaining the world but losing his soul (Mark 8:36). That is the central story of the fall from grace into corruption. Technological progress produced spiritual depravity. This problem played out into Christendom, with alienation between spirit and nature generating a dominant church theology that thought it was totally separate from nature.

Peter Ciaccio went on to describe the Biblical tension between rural integrity and urban immorality. God made the garden but people made cities. King David came from the country as a shepherd but was corrupted in the city by royal power. The prophet Amos was a herdsman called to the city. Jesus mixes elements of the stories of Adam, Moses and David with their rural origins. Bethlehem was an insignificant village, outside urban power, unknown to Herod. Nazareth was remote from the city of Jerusalem (indeed so remote that archaeologists have not even been able to prove it existed at the time of Christ).

The integration of these visions of the city and garden comes together in the visions of [Revelation 21-22](#), with Peter suggesting the city of God with its foundations of twelve jewels coming down from heaven shows God accepts us as city dwellers. The River of Life and the Tree of Life are at the centre of this symbolic holy city, and they explain what this new reconciliation involves. The tree grows on both sides of the river, unlike any real river, and has twelve fruits, one for each month, ‘for the healing of the nations’.



My own interpretation of this mysterious image of the Tree of Life, which I have been crying about in the wilderness for decades, is that it is an obvious symbolic metaphor for the visible heavens of the night sky as the manifestation of the glory and grandeur and grace of God. The zodiac stars in their twelve monthly groups appear six on one side of the celestial river, the Milky Way, and six on the other side, in exact match to the Biblical text. I am yet to find any Christian willing to even discuss this interpretation, which seems to reflect how deeply counter-cultural its natural theology is against the prevailing supernatural theories of God. This astronomical interpretation is a theme that can help explain the underlying secret symbolic meaning of [Psalm 45:4](#) “There is a river whose streams delight the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.”

Peter explained how the return of the Tree of Life at the end of the Bible completes the book as a well-structured story, a ring composition signalling closure of the narrative, after its previous appearance in Eden as the symbol of divine presence and grace from which humanity was excluded at the fall. The Tree of Life has evolved from the centre of the garden to the centre of the city, reflecting human urban evolution. Our dominant fallen focus has created a ‘cartel of domination’. Peter mentioned money, power, greed, class, blood, nation, family, binary ideology, misogyny and patriarchy as factors supporting this cartel. What matters now is to create space for the Tree of Life, as a holy symbol of how we belong to God, a symbol with power to heal divisions and sorrows and broken hearts, bringing peace and justice for humans and nature. At the centre of our global village, the Tree of Life is a powerful image, a vision to support our sacred struggle for social, economic and climate justice.

This sort of radical theology is what I love about the Student Christian Movement, opening ideas with deep and far reaching implications for social transformation. There

is little public oxygen for such conversation, and I would love to see WSCF do more to encourage it.

Talking About Religion in Berlin

Robbie Tulip

This article is about an exposure tour of some Berlin religious sites during the WSCF Assembly and a conversation about theology during the tour. I went on a tour looking at religion in Berlin with a focus on interfaith relations. We first visited the House of One. This remarkable initiative is a planned multi-faith centre with separate worship spaces for Jews, Muslims and Christians joined by a shared meeting area – [see animation](#). Our group heard an introductory talk and did a site tour, located on the ruins of Berlin’s oldest known church. The architectural design reflects how a physical space can enable new cultural practice, given that dialogue and cooperation between different traditions seem so difficult to achieve in our contemporary retreat to tribalism. The House of One community have laid their foundation stone and raised the money to complete the building in the next few years. I asked why the name is in English. Uwe explained that there is no German translation of the strange and impossible English word “of”. Our group had a long conversation with the guide, who was Jewish, including about the growing return of anti-Jewish sentiment among young people in Germany. Encouraging dialogue and personal contact is essential to foster shared understanding. I am wondering if a similar multi faith space might be possible at the



Australian National University where I manage the chaplaincy.

The [Friedrichswerder Church](#), our next visit, is one of these magnificent old buildings the Germans have lovingly restored to its original glory only to find the collapse of faith has meant there is no demand for its original purpose as a house of worship. But never mind, the architecture creates such a glorious atmosphere of reverence and wonder that they have devoted it to something they really can worship – German marble sculpture.

Some of my favourite sculptures were of Achilles, Cain as a bub, and a bust of the great German scientist Humboldt. Old cathedrals really knew how to do light and acoustics, and this one shows off the art very well.

We called in for lunch at the café run by the Berlin Student Christian Movement. It is a



lovely street frontage with a kitchen. The German SCM, or Evangelische Studierenden Gemeinde, has active branches in universities all around the country and is a very impressive organisation.

I had the opportunity at the ESG cafe to share views on theology with Patrick Ramsay, Assembly delegate from the UK, who is doing a PhD in geometry. More on that below.

Finally, we visited the tragic site of the former central Berlin synagogue. It was the biggest worship building in the city, with 3000 seats, reflecting the high prominence of the Jewish community until the Nazi destruction.



The heart-rending scale of personal and cultural loss from the Hitler genocide continues to be a big source of mourning and grief in Berlin. The synagogue would have been burned down in the nationwide pogroms on Kristallnacht in 1938 except the police dispersed the Nazis and called the fire brigade. We wandered through the empty ground where this magnificent place of worship stood until it was destroyed by British bombing in 1943. Now the front half is all that is left, enough to provide a clear sense of the former scale. The design allowed for the old

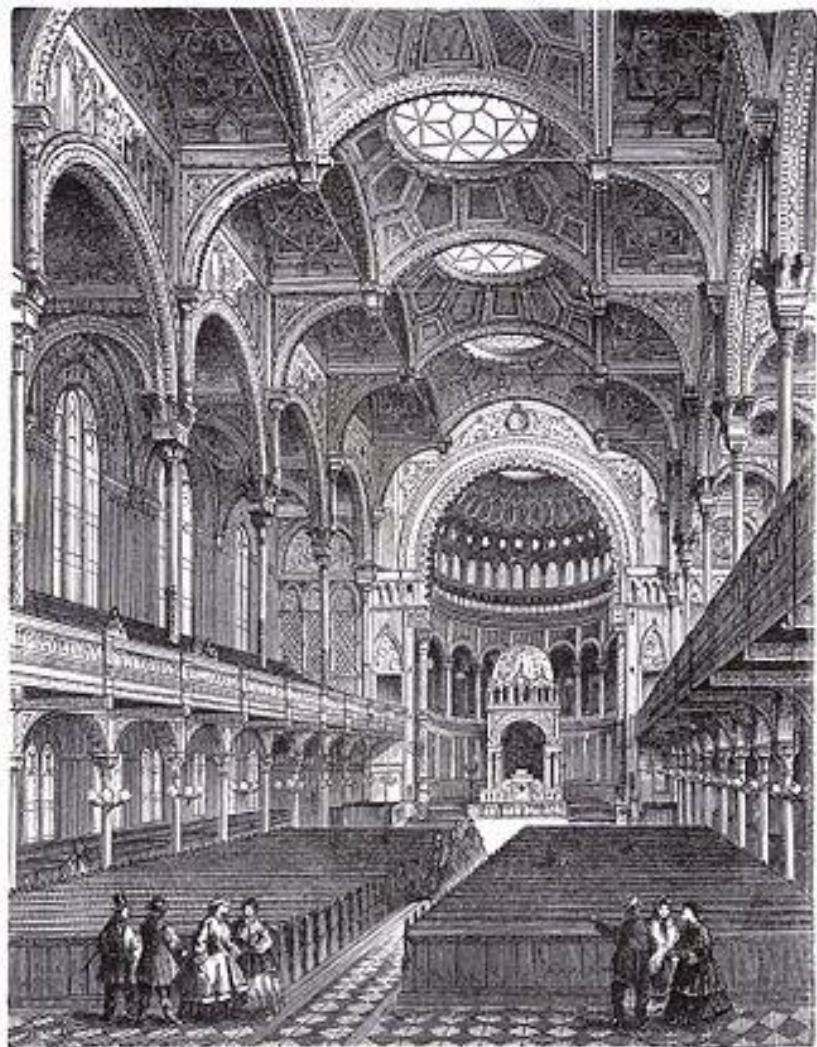


Jewish tradition of separate seating of men and women. A haunting photo in the synagogue museum showed the main room full of thousands of men, all well dressed and looking distinguished, educated, wealthy, humane and compassionate. Most would have died in Auschwitz, in utter shock at their bewildering betrayal by the nation they had loyally served.

My chat with Patrick as we walked between these sites in Berlin gave me a good chance to explain my views on theology. It is not often that I find anyone who has capacity to talk sensibly about theology without strong preconceptions. Religion is such an emotional topic, where childhood ideas and cultural conventions well up from the unconscious to take on an accidentally absolute status. As well, church people often tend to be bigoted. One infamous example of rank prejudice is from the leading Anglican theologian NT Wright, who said he would no more debate some critics of his faith than expect an astronomer to debate authors who claim the moon is made of green cheese. Fear that any different idea is likely to be crazy is a barrier to courteous conversation and mutual learning.

Patrick's PhD level studies in advanced mathematics seemed to protect him somewhat from this hostile syndrome. He was able to ask some astute questions that did not derail the dialogue, a rare thing in my experience.

I explained that my interest is to place Christian faith in the context of science, methodically questioning all assumptions. This has led me to a completely different understanding of Christian origins from the orthodox story. For thousands of years, religion was intimately connected to astronomy. This makes it plausible that astronomer-priests noticed the slow movement of the stars against the seasons, as



that was essential for them to time planting and rituals. We have no direct evidence of this observation of seasonal shift of the stars as it affected culture. There is, however, abundant circumstantial evidence. The Gospels are full of stellar images that are best explained by knowledge of this seasonal movement, known as precession of the equinoxes. The presence of these camouflaged images in the Bible reflects that the authors regarded actual observation of the visible starry heavens as a way to interpret the order, grandeur, stability and glory of God, in ways that have been largely forgotten.

Ancient astronomers observed the precession of the equinoxes into the constellations of Pisces and Virgo at the time of Christ, as attested by Hipparchus in the second century BC. This observation is reflected in messianic



expectations around that time, and in numerous Gospel images such as the loaves and fishes, the beginning and end, the fisher of men, as well as the whole theme of the BC/AD turning point of time and numerous obscure visions in the Apocalypse.

I mentioned to Patrick that John's account of the cleansing of the temple has Jesus sweep out the sheep and cows, matching the astronomy of the replacement of the zodiac ages of Aries the sheep and Taurus the cow by the new age of Pisces the fish. He asked, very reasonably, why then is Jesus described as a sheep as well as a fish? This is the sort of question I like. My reading draws from the symbolism of Jesus as the first and last, represented by the Greek letters alpha and omega seen in numerous Christian symbols such as the Chi Rho Cross. This theme of the unity of the beginning and end creates a cyclic vision in which his imagined role as the logos or incarnation of eternal reason meant Jesus could equally be represented by the sheep and the fish as symbols of the closing cosmic age and the opening cosmic age.

I further explained to Patrick my hypothesis that a secret wisdom mystery community developed the cosmic vision of Jesus Christ as universal saviour, integrating ancient oral religions from numerous countries. This mystery tradition was savagely suppressed as the Roman Empire co-opted Christian ideas for its military security, leaving almost no sign of the existence of the older symbolic mystery teaching. The main surviving indications of this cosmic origin story after a millennium of Christian censorship are fugitive traces in the Bible, texts that only survived because their real meaning was well hidden. As well, there are large mysterious gaps in Christian history. Most importantly, the justification for this scientific hypothesis is that it provides a simple and coherent explanation of all the available evidence. Astronomy provided the original intellectual structure of Christianity, without any need for literal miracles or supernatural assertions, reading the whole Bible as natural parable.

What I like about this approach is that it provides an elegant basis for Christianity to justify its core ethical ideas against an accurate and plausible ancient cosmology, with a systematic theology that furthermore provides an equally compelling explanation of the ideas of the Second Coming, which could even have been imagined in ancient times as the dawn of the zodiac age of Aquarius. My experience is that Christians tend to greet such conversation with a deathly silence, as it generates such cognitive dissonance they do not know where to begin to discuss it. I mentioned to Patrick that one of the problems is that three rival traditions contributed to Christian origins, philosophy, religion and astrology. Each is hostile to the other two. That makes the effort to compare and integrate them today as an explanation of Christian origins quite unpopular and difficult.

Some [extra photos](#) include me with Saint Gertrude, patron saint of pest exterminators.

Since returning home from Berlin, I have followed up on some of the ideas discussed here in online interviews, on [cosmology in the early church](#), [The Last Supper](#) by Leonardo Da Vinci, and [climate change](#).

Please also see a range of interviews at the ASCM YouTube channel -
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UComAdAiyJxC3PN1A0gUcWXQ>

"We have read the articles regarding the WSCF General Assembly in the magazine and they are very powerful. It is indeed a good practice between us to share our work, discussions and processes at the national, regional, and global levels."

Marcelo Leites
General Secretary, World Student Christian Federation



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Operating the ASCM requires ongoing financial support for staff, and for travel. If we had more money we could do much more to support student involvement. Meetings and conferences and conversations and publications build leadership capability of our members for the benefit of both ASCM and the broader community.

We send out an annual financial donation appeal each year. All responses are gratefully received, including any news you might have. If you find it convenient to give at other times, you can now do so most easily by [PayPal](#).

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Jubilee Grapevine: Registered with the National Library of Australia: Issue 2/2022, ISSN 2653-3243

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