

**ASCM interview with Father James (Jim) Minchin by Jane Yule, Melbourne, 16 April 1997.**

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

**A:** No. I was at Camberwell Grammar School from 1948–59, the entire period of my schooling. Tom Timpson, [an Anglican priest] who was the headmaster for the latter part of my time, taught me Classics. I did Latin in fifth and sixth forms, and I was the only student by that stage so I got to know him well then. But he'd also prepared me for my confirmation in August 1957 [in] the two or three months before that time. I'm not quite sure why I was sent to confirmation classes. I think my mother, who was a church-goer once or twice a year, felt that it would be the proper thing to do at a church school. But I loved it. He was very good, his classes, and it really was a turning point in my life. Being a very isolated child, I was mucked around at school a great deal, [being upgraded twice and falling behind in sports skills], and I was not happy at home. So this provided the first experience I'd ever had of sensing a place in the larger scheme of things. But there were no Christian groups at the school at all, no ISCF and certainly not an SCM.

The school was basically of poor academic standing, with one or two exceptions amongst the teachers. [It was] a school in which there was little or no evidence of an Anglican connection, apart from the odd compulsory service for Anzac Day or other things like that. The local parish church, which was connected to the school through the vicar of the parish, St Mark's Camberwell, was ... one of the dullest churches in Christendom. So the confirmation was a big turning point, [and] within a few months of my confirmation I started attending a parish near my home in Hartwell. St Dunstan's Camberwell was the name of the parish and [it] was very important for my spiritual formation, because I encountered for the first time a [fairly] full-blown Anglo-Catholicism, which I found enormously attractive. But in terms of ecumenical involvement, I'd had virtually none. I knew little or nothing about the rest of the Christian scene, apart from what I encountered in my parish. And then ... I offered for ordination, which was initially at Tom Timpson's suggestion, a suggestion that I rebuffed at first but came to realise lay exactly along the grain of my own thinking. ... [As a result of being selected] I ended up in Trinity College in 1960 as a candidate for the

Diocese of Melbourne and doing my Arts and Science [degree] at Melbourne University.

**Q: So you started at Melbourne Uni. in 1960 and were there for six years ... doing a combined degree with your Theology and Arts?**

**A:** Yes.

**Q: When did you encounter the SCM on campus?**

**A:** It would have been in my first year in 1960. I was aware of the SCM and I attended a couple of [its] public meetings. I think in 1960, if I'm not mistaken, [or maybe it was the year before], they had Michael Fisher ... the Franciscan Anglican [running] a mission. But also within the college, [a few] people like John Gaden were involved in the SCM and they drew my attention to its existence. And through Classics I met James McCaughey, who became a good friend later on, and he was involved with the SCM as well.

**Q: So were you involved in the Anglican Society?**

**A:** Yes. I joined the Anglican Society in 1960, I think largely because it used to meet at Trinity College chapel and there was a logical connection there since I was a theologian in Trinity. But I don't remember joining the SCM until 1961. I was attracted to it but mainly for its public functions. I wasn't interested in the small groups because I had plenty of [similar activity] at Trinity.

**Q: So the SCM at that stage was quite a big group on campus?**

**A:** Yes. [There would have been] a core membership of about 250 I would have thought, around 1961-62, and a peripheral ... interest [by] another one or two hundred, depending on what was happening. We had regular Bible study groups and various task-oriented groups ... around particular concerns.

**Q: And they'd have speakers most weeks?**

**A:** Yes, there'd usually be speakers or public debates. I remember being involved in a big public debate, with the public lecture theatre crowded out, between the SCM and the Rationalist Society. Lachlan Chipman and a couple of other people, John Chandler, ... we debated against.

**Q: What was the topic?**

**A:** It was the usual thing, about the existence of God, I forget the exact topic. It was very evident at that stage that the Rationalist Society had a well-trained force of claqueurs, who would applaud [on cue]. At the same time we made sure there was a good SCM representation. So it was quite lively and fiery.

**Q: So they would be quite common. Did you have [the debates] with other groups as well, other Christian groups, or political groups?**

**A:** No, no. The Evangelical Union would have nothing to do with us. We did [have, however], in the time I was a member, [though] I wasn't an office holder at that stage, the first conference ever held between the Newman Society and the SCM. [It] took place at Ocean Grove, I remember that vividly, [and] I think it was in 1962. That brought together some of the luminaries from the Newman Society, people like Vin Buckley and Rowan Ireland and Peter Wertheim, together with people in the SCM. It was a marvellous experience. I tried later on, when I was president of the SCM, to bring about a better relationship with the EU, and perhaps we can talk about that a bit later, but it was much more problematic.

**Q: Was the SCM involved very much with groups like the SRC?**

**A:** No. I didn't myself get involved in student politics of an overt kind, either through the SRC or through the political party groups. The only one that I would have joined, had I had any kind of contact, was the Labor Club. But at that stage my life at Trinity College was so rich and demanding—we were spending two and a half hours every day in chapel—it took a great effort to have extensive involvements outside. I really only got heavily involved in SCM because I was asked to. It happened that within [the space of] twenty-four hours I was asked to be president of the SCM and president of the Anglican Society. Had that not happened I would have had no deep involvement with SCM, I just would have been a peripheral member.

**Q: So did you decline the presidency of the Anglican Society?**

**A:** I declined both, and then was persuaded by John Langmore and James McCaughey to take on the SCM. And since there were no other nominees, I think it was a rigged election.

**Q: So how did they persuade you?**

**A:** They just said they thought it was important to get Anglicans involved, because there hadn't been much Anglican involvement. They said they thought that I clearly had some energy in areas they [considered] important to build into SCM. I was probably, just by dint of being an Anglican candidate for ordination at Trinity College, a somewhat churchier person than the run of the SCM. I'm not quite sure why, but they felt that what I had to offer was something that would be of value to the SCM at that juncture.

**Q: So do you think at that time the SCM was more concerned with social and political issues rather than theological ones?**

**A:** No, the social and political involvement of the SCM ebbed and flowed, usually around particular issues. I think the late 1950s, early 1960s, before I became involved were more heavily political, as were the late 1960s into the 1970s when the SCM almost dissolved itself into a political movement around [issues such as] feminism or the Vietnam War and people's attitudes to that. But in my time it was a sort of comfortably religious, essentially pan-Protestant, liberal entity. I think the most important thing that I observed in my time, when I was just at the edge of the SCM, was its emphasis on a faith lived out in relationships [and] lived out in delight at the university experience. [It] certainly had all sorts of political possibilities and social concerns there, but at that stage [it was] reasonably pious. The theology that was espoused was, of course, not fundamentalist as was the EU's, which had a strong doctrinal basis. But, in fact, paradoxically the current Christian Union or Evangelical Union position in the late 1980s into the 1990s was really quite close to the sort of position we held in the SCM in the 1960s. [There was a] strong emphasis still on the kingdom of God, and what that might mean for the church and for society, [and a] very strong distinction between the church and the kingdom of God. In a sense, I was one of those who instinctively blurred that distinction. [I did this] not because I saw it as non-existent, but because I saw it became a cheap option to discard the life of the church, however unsatisfactory it was, in favour of some idealised kingdom that was likely to burst in upon us at some future date.

**Q: So as president [of SCM] did you try to change the theology of the SCM at all or change its direction at least?**

**A:** No, I don't think so, that was never my style. The only thing I've ever known how to do is to be myself and, ... in some circumstances, that's not very productive. But I think the strengths of my time in the SCM were, firstly, because of the co-presidency arrangement. I was co-president with Dianne Adcock, as she then was, and I liked Di greatly and we got on well. Because I had a room at Trinity College we were able to do quite a lot of what you might call hospitality, bringing people over in small groups and getting to know them, and Di and I would do that together. I put quite a strong emphasis on worship and on quality worship, not just on trotting out some sort of platitude from a book, but trying to make our own worship. That was undoubtedly both because of my own personal commitment but also my Anglican training. I was, at the time, a student at Trinity College whose chaplain was Barry Marshall, one of the great figures of the twentieth century in the Anglican Church [of Australia]. He'd been a bush brother, he had an Oxford DPhil. [in Church History] and [had] been in the airforce ... as a radio operator in the Pacific theatre. He was just a remarkable man who made worship and faith alive for us, and I wanted to bring some of that energy and some of that enthusiasm to the SCM.

**Q: Was he an ecumenist as well?**

**A:** Yes, [though] he was not as passionate as other people were. But it was a time when Frank Woods was the Archbishop of Melbourne, and he was a passionate ecumenist with very strong SCM connections. That was another factor in my own personal support of the SCM, that I knew my Archbishop regarded it as such a worthwhile thing to do and I had enormous respect and admiration for him.

**Q: Because the SCM has always been a little bit dominated by Methodists, Presbyterians and, to a lesser extent, Congregationalists. How, as an Anglican, did you feel about that? Were there any tensions, for example, in worship?**

**A:** Yes, there were and it troubled me greatly though I probably took an Anglican line on this. ... At that stage I suppose I'd accepted the Anglican line that intercommunion was not really possible if the celebrant of the Eucharist was not episcopally ordained. And that, of course, ruled out the Presbyterian, Methodist [and] Congregationalist churches—the Uniting Church had not yet come into

being. At the same time I believed, and still do, that the Eucharist is absolutely critical, central to the life of the church, so there was a certain amount of tension there. My instincts were to go for intercommunion but, on the other hand, my church's ruling at that stage was still opposed to it, although Barry Marshall himself was really not all that fussed. I think the transition to a much more generous approach and, therefore, much more Christian approach was easier for me than it was for other Anglicans, who didn't even begin to recognise the ecclesial reality of these other denominations. So it did lead to tensions. I think, talking personally, the thing that troubled me most was the sense that the SCM was a big club for those who were reasonably wealthy and had been to schools like Scotch College and PLC or MLC. [It was for those] who had a sense of life being made for them, and [who] wanted to keep, as their parents had tried to do, some kind of marriage between their theological principles and their success in the world, [with a notion of *noblesse oblige* and public service underwriting the quality of achievement].

**Q: And also between each other?**

**A:** Yes, well, marriage is an operative word. It was nicknamed the Society for Courtship and Marriage, and a number of wonderful partnerships were established through the SCM.

**Q: But was it a big smug?**

**A:** It was extremely smug. But, at the same time, there were all sorts of little currents and frissons of tension between, say, Protestant and Anglican, let alone between evangelical and liberal, [and the] tensions with the more Catholic approach both from the Newman Society and Anglicans like myself. There were [also] tensions over the degree of our political involvement, because there were some who believed that was integral and others who believed that politics was too vicious and nasty a game for good Christian people to be involved with. So, yes, there were quite a lot of tensions that came up. The SCM, on the whole, was a good environment to work at those, because there was a strong emphasis on friendship and care for one another and a generosity of spirit to concede that other people's Christian approach had its own validity. And I loved that. The thing that I loved most about SCM, and it has always been the case, was the quality of some of the people I met. ... [However,] I didn't find [many] of the

theological gurus of the SCM at that stage [very inspiring]. I did later on but not at that stage. ...

**Q: Who were they, do you remember?**

**A:** People like Niebuhr for instance. I never liked Niebuhr's theology, I thought it was a cop out, a sell out.

**Q: In what way?**

**A:** Just the accommodation with the state. I thought this [was] not the way for us to go. We may gain purchase by this kind of accommodation with the state, or with a particular cultural form, but at the same time the Gospel can very easily lose its prophetic edge.

**Q: So was there an emphasis on American theologians at the time, was Paul Tillich another?**

**A:** Yes, Tillich was in and I never liked Tillich's thinking either. I thought that was, what you might call, using traditional language but investing it with a completely different set of meanings. I thought that was dishonest. I preferred ... Brunner to Barth, for instance, although the later Barth I found quite captivating because of the passion of [its juxtaposition of a transcendent and a human God]. So, yes, the guru figures in the SCM intellectually didn't appeal to me all that much, people like Colin Williams, for instance. I thought it was all too woolly and warm hearted, and I wanted a bit more edge with my theology. I wanted a bit better sense of the significance of the church.

**Q: So who appealed to you at that time?**

**A:** My main theological heroes were figures like Austin Farrer, who was an Anglican theologian [and] just a wonderful creative thinker, [and] to a lesser extent another Anglican called Eric Mascall. [I admired] some of the leading Roman Catholic theologians and thinkers of the time, particularly from France and the Continent, and I read very widely from them. I was [also] attracted to some of the more apocalyptic thinkers, say William Stringfellow in the States, and the early work of, though it was a bit later, Jürgen Moltmann and people who tried to marry existentialism with Christian theology. I found that quite powerful.

**Q: Was this too early for the liberation theologians?**

**A:** Yes, that was [later]. Liberation theology became very important to me really from my time in Singapore, but at that stage there was little or nothing happening on that front. The main points of development for Roman Catholics ... were coming out of the Continent and, to a lesser degree, from America. But that wasn't all that well known to me or to Protestants until our contact with the Newman Society began to bring some of it to the surface.

**Q: And when did that really come about, the Newman Society?**

**A:** It was around ... 1961 or 1962 that the first major contact [occurred]. I think Rachel Faggetter and John Gaden were presidents at the time and they were very instrumental in getting that off the ground. And that for me, personally, was the most productive in terms of thinking, because here were people who took the church very seriously but at the same time were not fundamentalists about the church and were willing to be quite critical. It was pre-Vatican II and that was a remarkable experience, because all that I knew of the Roman Catholic Church was the prejudice that I [had grown] up with as Protestant.

**Q: And socially, too, the Protestant / Catholic divide was huge, wasn't it?**

**A:** It was huge, yes. University was one of the few places where it began to be addressed or crossed, but [the bridging] still happened to a remarkably limited degree.

**Q: Similarly, in a way, what about women's contribution in the SCM? Do you think that it was as equal as the SCM wanted it to be or purported it to be?**

**A:** [In] the SCM, when it came to things like theology and Bible study and that sort of thing, there was a very strong masculine [influence], a kind of unspoken sense that this was men's preserve. On the other hand, there were some really terrific women involved with the SCM and had been over the years, [and women's and men's partnership was well recognised at all levels of leadership]. Rosalie McCutcheon was around in my time, [and there was also] the staff that I got to know in the national office when I became involved with that through being president at Melbourne. Many of [these] women, people like Diane Adcock, Rachel Faggetter, [and] Jenny Alexander, a whole range of women that I got to know in Melbourne ... I liked greatly and thought what marvellous people [they were].



**Q: So in a leadership basis there was quite a lot of equality amongst the students. What about the leaders outside of the student base, the speakers that would come in, were there many women at all involved in that?**

**A:** No, [but] again ... some of the seeds of the later fully flowered feminist movement, the sexual rights movement ... and all, of course, the range of political concerns—the environment, peace movement [and] all that sort of thing—they were there in the SCM. They were almost implicit in the existence of the SCM, and had come to the fore in the past and came to the fore again. But we seemed to be at a time when a lot of this was dormant or lying just below the surface. There were no major controversies, as I say, the most spectacular confrontations were the sorts of staged pieces we had with the Rationalist Society. There were no major issues in the wider society [in which] university students could be seen to have a stake. ... It was all simmering ready to burst out with the Vietnam War, which brought so many things to a head.

But neither in the music nor the culture, in the academic life nor in the political environment, was there really a sense of urgency or apocalypse. It was the halcyon [if silver] years of the Menzies era and things were moving along fairly well. The Cold War was very remote and although we began to come to terms with some of these issues, and the SCM was much better geared to that than a lot of the other student bodies, it was still a fairly easy time. I suppose ecumenism and the intra-Christian relations were the most important thing, apart from dealing with the 'way-out' rationalist and humanist elements.

**Q: With that intra-Christian relationship, when you tried to make overtures to the EU what happened?**

**A:** The first thing was that I got to know my counterpart as president of the EU, a fellow called Russ Conway, who was later a doctor. He and I used to do Bible studies together and we got on extremely well. His mother had actually taught me Chemistry at Camberwell Grammar and so there was a bit of an entrée there to get to know him. We came unstuck, [however,] in some of our exegesis. We ended up studying John's Gospel and he tried to tell me that the sixth chapter of John's Gospel had no reference to the Eucharist at all in it. [He was] talking about Jesus saying, 'Unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you', and I thought that was preposterous and said so. But despite these little flurries of feathers flying, we got on very well.

So I said to Russ one day, 'Could we get our central committees\* together?' (\*Yet again the grand titles that the EU in its Bible simplicity had managed [along with the SCM] to retain.) I remember we met in the Vice-Master's lodge at Ormond College, John Alexander was Vice-Master at Ormond, and you could have cut the air with a knife. The suspicion from the EU side towards these wicked liberals, and the sense of dislike, I suppose, [though] I'm not quite sure what the right word is, from the SCM side really didn't bode well. Even to pray together was an enormous effort because the SCM style of prayer was far less given to free-flowing, free association, pouring forth towards God. I'd discovered already in the evangelical circles [that this] could be highly political, [for] by addressing God you could say all sorts of nasty things about your brother or sister [or the world at large]. Very convenient, but that wasn't the SCM pattern. There was certainly room for spontaneity but our way of praying was much more ordered.

**Q: So you actually had more luck with the Catholics than the evangelicals?**

**A:** Yes, the relationship with the Catholics was far more productive.

**Q: Were there any national conferences particularly important to you?**

**A:** Yes, the Armidale conference at the New England Girls' School, NEGS, that was a terrific experience. For the first time I saw the breadth of the national movement, [as] I think there were about 300 people at it. I encountered for the first time Dr Broughton Knox, who was the principal of Moore College, a formidable figure and arch exponent of [Sydney Anglican Brethren-influenced] Calvinism. I couldn't believe that this was an Anglican in the same church that I belonged to, so that was a revelation. ... But more important was the sense of the importance of the Senior Friends, which I'd begun to glimpse in Melbourne but saw much more clearly at the national conference, [and that] ... of some of the figures who'd been in the SCM over the years. [There were people] who had got involved in every level of Australian society, often quite high levels of the public service or of the professions, ... and still kept their very strong faith. It was terrific to see that right through Australian society there were these people who'd been formed in the SCM, kept the links, but were going ahead in their own ways to live out their faith. I was deeply moved by that. ... I forget all the personnel who were there as leaders, [but we had] a couple of Anglican bishops who seemed quite impressive, [as well as] other people of great calibre giving us lectures and just opening our horizons right up, wide open.

**End of Side A: Side B.**

**Q: Can you comment on the national executive at the time?**

**A:** Yes. Because I was a co-president in Melbourne, and Di didn't have the time because she had to travel each day to uni. and she was very caught up in her course, I was the one of the two of us who went onto the national exec. Through that [I] had a lot more to do with people like Anthony Clunies-Ross and, above all, Ross Terrill, who I certainly [had] got to know as travelling secretary of the SCM but hadn't known [him] across the range of his interests. Ross, I have to say, I found the most disturbing person that I had anything to do with in SCM, because I always suspected he had a hidden agenda, a very extensive hidden agenda, and I never trusted his personal dealings. He reminded me of Gough Whitlam, whom I met later on. He always seemed to be looking, when in a crowd, ... for who was of advantage, who was of interest, rather than [at] the people he was actually talking to at the time. And I thought his political stance was somewhat conspiratorial and based on a less than open and transparent model of involvement. I realised afterwards that there was a great deal more worth to what he was on about, but at a personal level the chemistry was all wrong and that coloured quite negatively my experience of the national movement. But there were other people, like Doug Hobson, for instance, whom I thought the world of, and, of course, people like Frank Woods, my Archbishop, who'd been much involved in SCM in England and for whom I had tremendous regard. So there was a kind of ambiguous attitude [in me] to the national movement of the SCM, both from a conference level and then from the national exec. level.

**Q: I suppose it's always about accommodating personalities into a movement of that size when there's so many people involved. Once you finished your combined Arts/Theology degree you moved to Singapore, is that right?**

**A:** I had two years in church work in Melbourne. I kept my SCM links but, of course, they couldn't be very solid as I was too caught up in my parish work.

**Q: You were being ordained at this stage?**

**A:** I was ordained in March 1966, yes, as a deacon, [and] then the following February as a priest. ... Perhaps I should just mention, I think it was in about July 1967 I was offered, within two weeks, five different jobs [in Australia and Papua New Guinea], one of which was as a travelling secretary with the SCM. I wasn't in a position to undertake that, [however, as] I wanted to consolidate my training as a young cleric in the Anglican Church, but because of that it was clear that I had a wide range of interests. Frank Woods, on the recommendation of one of the other bishops in Melbourne, Geoff Sambell, heard about a position in Singapore and said, 'Would you like to take that up?'. So I was vetted and then sent to Singapore in 1968 as a kind of 'gift' from Melbourne. Once I was there I [became] the first expatriate who was paid entirely on local terms and conditions and I [stayed] there for three and a quarter years. And within a month of arriving I was right in the thick of the SCM in Singapore, which was not huge but quite active, predominantly again Presbyterian [and] Methodist in character, Methodist in particular.

**Q: Which probably reflects the colonisation process?**

**A:** At that stage Protestantism in Singapore was fairly liberal, [and] the Anglican Church was neither opposed [to] nor involved with the ecumenical movement [to] any significant degree. But SCM was quite active and through Singapore SCM I also met people from the Malaysian, Thai and Indonesian SCMs and that was a great experience. And those friendships with people like Lee Soo Jin and Lim Mah Hui were really some of the most important of my entire time in Singapore.

**Q: Were the issues that were important to the Singapore SCM quite different from the Australian?**

**A:** No, they were remarkably continuous but here in a multicultural setting one had to finesse them differently. I got involved in student missions on campus because of my music[al interest], I was asked to bring that into play, and I got quite strongly involved with student politicians in Singapore [and] to a lesser degree in Malaysia. That proved to be very helpful later on in the course of my postgraduate studies on Singapore.

**Q: Did you have much to do with the WSCF? Did you attend any conferences while you were there?**

**A:** No, I didn't. At that stage I had very little contact with WSCF, except to the extent that we had WSCF personnel in Melbourne or in Singapore when I was there and I met with them. A friend who became very close to me while I was in Singapore was a Dutch SCMer appointed from the Netherlands to work in Singapore for the SCM. That [friendship] introduced me to a lot of the people in the international movement, and again they passed through Singapore and we looked after them. But I didn't attend conferences at that stage, apart from the regional ones in Malaysia or Singapore or Thailand.

**Q: What was the international agenda of the SCM and WSCF at that stage? ...**

**A:** The main thing was establishing a clear Christian presence on the campuses, trying to make sure that it was an ecumenical presence and not just [a] sectarian or confessional presence. There was [also] a strong willingness to be part of ... those campus movements trying to improve the quality of education. Inevitably one got caught up in, say, colonial or anti-colonial rhetoric. At the same time, because the SCM was internationally connected we were able to trade on that, [as] many of the formative people in the universities, in the English-speaking world at least, had SCM connections.

**Q: So you left Singapore and went back to Melbourne to become chaplain at Trinity College in 1971?**

**A:** That's right, 1971.

**Q: You [are] in a good position, perhaps, to comment on what happened to the SCM [from] the time that you'd been a member and when you came back to campus years later, [at which stage] it was a much diminished group?**

**A:** Very much so. I had been involved in the [early stages] of the Vietnam protest, but because I left Melbourne in early 1968 I wasn't there for the full flowering of it. It became clear on my return that the SCM had been decimated, often for quite positive reasons in that people had been caught up, coming from a school background or a desire to be part of a Christian movement on campus, ... in this protest at the war in general and at the way the draft [was organised. There were] all sorts of concurrent issues that came up with the Vietnam War, [because] it became a point of crystallising [for] a lot of other issues that were

there. Many people felt, 'Well, if my real interest in life is to be part of the peace movement, for instance, if my real energy is going to go into looking at gender roles and looking at the future of Australian political life, that's where I'll put my energy. The SCM is a luxury I no longer need.' So there was a terrific exit but not of people [who had lost their faith] necessarily. Some *had* [of course] lost their faith [in the wake of] the 'God is Dead' movement in the mid 1960s.

**Q: Had that been important to you?**

**A:** Not personally because [although] I found it exciting [it was] never remotely plausible to me. ... Since my confirmation I've had this [sense, which] is quite regrettable at times [in terms of dealing with people who have no interest in God's existence], this absolutely ineradicable sense of God. There are times when I wish fervently I didn't believe in God, firstly, because it would make it much easier to get on with people whom I like greatly and who have no interest in God at all. But, secondly, because having God there, [having] the relationship with God there, I feel I can't escape it. I feel I'm sometimes pursued by God in a way that I'd rather didn't happen. Anyway, be that as it may, I was never personally drawn to the 'God is Dead' movement.

**Q: But other people were very much so, and either [because] of that, or for some other reason, lost their faith around this time in the late 1960s, and the SCM suffered as a consequence.**

**A:** Yes, very significantly and, as you say, quite apart from the reasons I have already given. Those who were wrestling, say, with their sexuality, those who were wrestling with their faith, their basic faith, found [that] they knew they were wrestling against the evangelical certainties or the certainties of the Roman Catholic Church. But the SCM appeared to be so vague on all the major issues that you couldn't have a good fight, and what's the point of staying in a movement which is not really offering you any specific way forward. I think that changed, certainly when I came back into the movement in the mid-1970s [and] more solidly when I got back from Oxford and was working with the Jesuits. By that stage the SCM was tiny, but beginning tentatively to decide that here were some challenges that were well worth meeting to mint a currency of faith that was neither dishonest to one's own experience nor completely out of kilter with the tradition.

**Q: Do you think the mainstream churches during that time, the late 1960s and early 1970s, had not really been there for young people?**

**A:** Yes. They never had been, but the point was [that] in a clearly patterned society of strong nuclear family life ... the fact of crowded churches had sustained the illusion that the young people were all going to grow into card-carrying members of their churches. The 1970s was the time when that began to be shattered, that particular illusion, and the churches really took a long time to desist from complacency and to see what might need to be done. In the meanwhile, at the campus level, a lot of people had left or else had found solace in the certainties of evangelicalism.

**Q: So how was it being chaplain at this time at Trinity?**

**A:** Very disturbing. In 1971 to 1973 when I was at Trinity, Melbourne, I didn't have a lot to do with [SCM], although I certainly went to meetings and kept in touch with people that I had known. My main energy I found to be located with[in] the student political movement. I did quite a lot of work following up from my Singapore connections and South-East Asian connections with the NUAS, or AUS as it became, and people like Neil McLean were very important to me at that stage. Trinity itself had [changed, too]. It probably had always been so, but [I hadn't noticed] because I loved most of my time there so deeply—for the friendships, for the discipline and framework of training for ordination, for the delight of Barry Marshall. That had all gone and now we had a college in which, for instance, drugs were rife and we really had little or no idea of what we were dealing with. I remember one student tripping out on LSD and crashing his car, and I was absolutely terrified as to what was happening to these lovely kids [who] seemed to have no idea how to handle the challenges put before them. There was a [also] little homosexual 'mafia' in the college that was picking off the best looking freshers. Some of the people in that 'mafia' were quite talented and able people, but the sense of exploitation was really revolting and, again, we didn't know what to do with it. So I found Trinity College at that stage, and I said so rather too often publicly I think, a detestable place to be. The Theological Faculty had lost all inner vitality, it was ...

**Q: They weren't really meeting the challenges?**

**A:** No. The Theological Faculty was only a small part of the college. [Although I greatly liked and respected many of the college] students, there was no sense of a corporate culture at Trinity College that met the challenges, no grappling with the big issues; that all happened outside the college. [Very few teaching staff in the Theological Faculty or more broadly commanded stature in my eyes.]

**Q: So you left Trinity and ...**

**A:** Went to Oxford.

**Q: ... And were you involved in the British SCM there?**

**A:** ... Yes, very closely. People like Rowan Williams, who is now Bishop of Monmouth and I think probably the leading Anglican scholar in the world-wide church [and a] marvellous man, was a graduate student involved with the SCM. [There were also] other friends of mine who've now left any kind of Christian allegiance but who were in the SCM at that stage. [At] this time [too, there was] a strong Anglican preponderance because that is the nature of the British SCM. The British SCM had very strong non-conformist, so-called non-conformist, input but ... the Anglican Church had kept faith with it. [This] pleased me greatly because, apart from Frank Woods, there was very little else in the Australian Anglican Church pushing people to take the SCM seriously.

**Q: ... Was the SCM at Oxford also flailing in the way that it had been at Melbourne University?**

**A:** Yes. [At least] it was small in numbers but without the neurotic and almost pathological sense of failure that the Australian SCM went through in the early 1970s. The British SCM was small but it was just accepted that was the way. There are probably all sorts of reasons [for that], which I can't begin to fathom. ... What I found in the British SCM was a series of small movements, but [ones that had] a degree of confidence about what they were doing. When I came back and became national chair, the thing that upset me most of all was that SCM students kept saying to me and to the senior friends involved, 'What is the SCM?'. And I'd say to them, 'Look, the SCM has this history, this tradition but it is what you make of it. SCM won't stay static, it will be what you make of it.' But they continued to want to have ... a prefabricated template of the SCM into which they could fit or which they would then reject, rather than seeing it as a kind of



organic thing that they could [help re-]create. And that was, I would have to say, the deepest frustration of my years as national chairman, that it just wasn't worked through. There were other wonderful things happening, [though]. There was a flowering, for instance, of feminist concerns, and although I personally found some of it hard to cope with, because it could be quite aggressive, at the same time I knew that it had to happen. The quality of our language [needed work, for example]. I slipped back into saying chairman just a moment ago, and I was constantly tackled for that.

**Q: And also the whole sexuality issue?**

**A:** That wasn't really as critical by 1978 as it became a little later and into the 1980s. These things all seem to have their era, their particular period of time.

**Q: And in a way the SCM is almost a forerunner for things that happen in the church later on, perhaps?**

**A:** Almost always.

**Q: Like the White Australia Policy and racism [were taken on by SCM] a long time before the church [did]. ... The same with feminism and the sexuality report in the UCA; ... these issues were tackled ten or fifteen years ago in SCM.**

**A:** Yes, but ... the people from the late 1960s onwards, the people who were in the SCM, didn't always make it into the mainstream of church life. In the olden days [if] you look at all the leaders of the ecumenical movement, people like Visser t'Hooft and William Temple and so on, they'd all been much involved in the SCM and WSCF before they came to the ecumenical movement. But if that was ever the case, and it was to some degree even with my generation to the mid-1960s, beyond that the flow-on to the life of the church was negligible. I think that that's been a terrible impoverishment for the churches. It's not just the churches' fault, [though] it is to some degree, of course. It's also because the people who went into the SCM found that their real point of interest was not [the] Christian faith so much, or the whole Christian fact or phenomenon. Their real interest was around particular issues of their own identity or of the nature of society, which they felt they had to put their prime energy into resolving or dealing with. And for that reason, although the SCM I think has been quite

prophetic at many times, if the prophet doesn't even get heard in the life of the church the impact will be minimal.

**Q: ... I don't know if you have much to do with [the SCM today]?**

**A:** Not a great deal at the present, ... [though I enjoy contact with people such as Helen Hill, John Langmore, Di Langmore and many others].

**Q: It seems there are two ways of going about reviving it. Sydney has put in a Uniting Church chaplain and is setting up a UCA group of students, [while] Melbourne has employed a development worker eighteen months ago who ... has been working within the Melbourne University branch and trying to establish branches elsewhere. I don't know if you'd like to comment on what you think would be a good way for the SCM to go into the future?**

**A:** The first thing I have to say is that one of my fundamental qualms about the SCM, and it was true of Trinity College as well, [is] any community that is primarily based around [and restricted to people caught up with] tertiary study is of itself fatally flawed. [This is] because the church is a community of reconciliation, and if your reconciliation from the outset precludes class [and] educational level, [then] reconciliation is [intrinsically] weak from the outset. I really have little or no interest in seeing the SCM continue into the future if it has tabs on itself. [However,] if it sees itself as a kind of servant of the Christian Gospel, a servant of the student community, and it often has, of course, then that's terrific. [The flip side is that] if it sees itself as [a] servant then it will face the likelihood, from time to time, of disappearing on a particular campus. And then, because the traditional church is very often preoccupied with [its] own survival and is no more able to reach out to the campuses of Australia, if there wasn't an SCM you almost have to invent one, and to me there's no point. The SCM has a fantastic history but at its heart it can only be accounted [a tiny] part of God's kingdom, God's domain, if it seeks firstly to serve its communities, and secondly to serve the wider cause of the kingdom. ... When the SCM has got involved outside campus working with refugees or against White Australia or whatever it might be, that to me is the period when it's been at its best. When it becomes preoccupied with university life, with internal fellowship matters or even with doctrinal shibboleths, then, to me, the SCM even if it flourishes doesn't deserve to.

I have no absolute commitment to the future of the SCM. On the other hand, I have to say that in many situations, particularly in an economic rationalist and mean-spirited and deconstructionist atmosphere, the role of the SCM has been a [cluster] point for people who are genuinely seeking a better future for themselves and for their contemporaries. I think the role of the SCM is absolutely invaluable, but how you go about doing it [is unclear]. If you become preoccupied with surviving as a society, as a body, as an organisation, in my view you are likely to fail because these are such difficult times [to survive] for any body that is superfluous to hedonism or consumerism. ... The churches themselves are going through enormous sorting out, and the great temptation is to make the survival of the church or of the SCM or bodies like that an end in itself and it's not. So I feel ambiguous about it all. I'm quite excited by some of the energy I see and [that] I found at Canberra, for instance, last September. ...

**Q: But it's the spirit, not the organisation?**

**A:** It's the spirit. Some of the organisational moves that are being made I think are quite indulgent. If they don't fail, and they may not because they are indulgent and Australia is a very indulgent society, they deserve to fail. There's the puritan in me!

**Q: Finally, in your opinion what is the SCM's most valuable contribution to Australia's religious, social and/or political life?**

**A:** I think the SCM sometimes, despite its best endeavours, has made an enormous contribution, and its best contribution has been through the quietness of its operation. Any movement, particularly one that is confined to a particular sector of the society that tries to exaggerate its own importance or blow its own trumpet, in my view, is profoundly corrupt within. SCM has, at its best, not done that. ... Sometimes, as I say, [SCM has] tried to [enter] the self-aggrandisement stakes but it hasn't worked. SCM has been enormously important in providing a generous space for Christians to think through their faith, come to terms with what the Bible is, and [to see] that one just cannot approach the Bible as if it were a text that one took straight from God, from heaven, and bow down passively before. That kind of idolatry has never been acceptable in the SCM as I've known it. So taking Scripture [and] tradition and scrutinising them rigorously, that has been a wonderful contribution.

[The] second thing is [its] contribution to ecumenism, just experiencing the reality of a deep fellowship with people of another Christian provenance. That is a wonderful thing and I hope the ecumenism goes beyond purely intra-Christian to contact with Jews and Muslims and people of other faiths. I certainly felt encouraged by the SCM [to do that], even though it didn't happen in my time. I've gone on and done those things with an SCM spirit, as you might put it. I think in terms of involvement in the wider society, probably SCM's contribution is less visible now than it was up until the early 1960s, but that contribution is still very important. [It gave people] the conviction that being a Christian commits you to being deeply involved in the life of the nation, and beyond the nation, the region, the world. It's very much a world-affirming movement and that goes right back to Mott and the early pioneers of the SCM.

I think that's a fantastic thing, the freedom not only to look at questions of one's own identity, one's own place in the scheme of things, one's own talents and contributions, one's deficiencies and all the rest of it, [and] a freedom about one's personal matters, but there's also the possibility to connect up to all sorts of other people who are trying ... through coalitions to build a better pattern for the future. Our involvement in most of the major social political things [is] very important. The way that we've been able to bring influence to bear in government, in public service, in the judiciary, in the professions, it's quite astonishing, and, of course, in the universities. And I think, in a sense, inevitably the SCM's greatest contribution to Australian life has been in pressing for good quality education; not based on privilege for a few, not based on a highly rationalistic understanding of the university, a compartmentalised idea that only those skills that help people make money or help the nation make money are worth pursuing. I think it's an enormously beneficial movement, which is impossible to evaluate in full.

**Interview ends.**