



THE ECUMENICAL CHAPLAINCY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

CALLING OUR FRIENDS

Summer 2020/21 Volume 14

From the Chaplains



Associate Chaplain Leonard Clarke Jr. (Jae)

Here we are! More than a year has passed since Covid-19's impact on the world. Countless lives have been lost. Many individual worlds have been shattered. Life as we know it for many would never be able to return to a sense of normalcy. But, even in tragedy and despair, there remains hope.

Hope has strengthened and comforted so many of the students that I am honoured to serve at UTSC. As one student defiantly proclaimed, "hope was my antidote before the vaccine!" They could not be more right. While hope is heightened in the presence of calamity, it has always been a foundation for many of us.

I know that some of us have lost a considerable amount in the past year. So a message of hope is likely unwelcomed. I get it. But I believe it is the most defiantly perfect message for these times. Hope can be your antidote if you would only draw from it! The good news is hope is not a thing you must seek. Hope is innate. It is already in us waiting to be drawn. You can do this!

Student Christian Movement at 100 years

BY ESTHER TOWNSHEND, SCM U OF T COORDINATOR



SCM 100 years celebration poster

A couple years ago, I remember brainstorming ideas for a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Student Christian Movement in Canada in 2021. We talked about a conference, a fundraising campaign, and got as far as creating a special logo. And then everything turned upside down. As we mark SCM's centennial during a global pandemic that has made our society's inequities devastatingly apparent, it strikes me that our experiences have much in common with those of SCMer's 100 years ago. In 1921, students in Toronto had recently survived a world war and a pandemic, and were living through a time of radical social change. New technologies were transforming society. Workers struggled for labour rights in a context of vast wealth disparity. Black and Indigenous communities fought for safety and dignity. And politically engaged young people sought to establish communities inspired by a social gospel of justice, solidarity and love. In 2021, our membership has become more diverse in many ways, and Canadian society has advanced in terms of formal equality and human rights protections; yet we continue to engage in many of the same struggles for equity.

A month ago, we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the SCM over Zoom. In a panel discussion, Divy, the SCM national secretary, and I interviewed alumni from the 1940s to the present. What really shone through was precisely the common thread of a social gospel – a message of liberation that changed young people's lives.

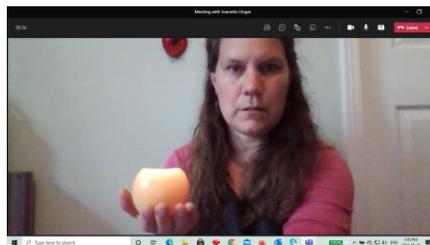
SCM celebrates 100 years.....

Lois Wilson told us about Canadian students finding the moral courage, in the midst of World War II, to resist the internment of Japanese Canadians. Joy Kennedy told us about students in the late 1960s weaving together scripture and politics, and immersing themselves in liberation movements, building relationships of international, intercultural and interfaith solidarity. HyeRan Kim-Cragg told us about Korean students in the late 1980s for whom following Jesus meant facing teargas and arrest every weekend at demonstrations for democracy and peace. Elliott Gunn told us about SCMerS at Ryerson University today, many of whom have moved away from conservative evangelical churches, finding a sense of home in a community that explores faith through the lens of social justice.

This gospel of liberation is very close to the core of my own SCM experience. When I started as SCM coordinator in 2016, I had big ideas about bringing social justice concerns into the church, and bringing the church out in solidarity with communities seeking justice. I did not expect to end up doing Bible study. Yet the first students I met who were passionate about SCM's potential were LGBTQ+ youth, many of them BIPOC, whose faith had been formed in conservative evangelical churches. They believed with conviction that Jesus loved them, but were painfully discovering that Christ's church did not always have room for them. They knew that there was good news for them in the Christian tradition, but that this good news was entangled with harmful theologies. They wanted to do Bible study, and so we did Bible study, using a brilliant contextual Bible study method handed down from the Ecumenical Chaplaincy at U of T. And it transformed my faith. I learned to see power dynamics in scripture – the push and pull between imperial theologies and theologies of liberation that is older even than the church. I learned to see the messages of love and liberation in the teachings of evangelical churches I had identified with oppressive politics, and to see the threads of paternalism and white supremacy in the mainline churches that are my spiritual home. In Bible study we dismantled everything we thought we knew about faith, and wove together theologies that were truly ours, informed by our own lives, and by each other's.

If I have learned one thing in my five years as SCM coordinator, it is that theology and ideology matter, because they are fundamentally about human experience. It matters whose voices and whose experiences shape the narratives that guide our community life and collective actions. I initially imagined SCM as a missional community, setting out to change the world based on a common vision. It has turned out to be something far more complex: a space of mutual conversion, of people being transformed by exploring what faith and justice mean in each of our unique lives, and in our life together. As I prepare to pass on my role as coordinator, I honestly can't wait to see how new leaders will empower students to claim the gospel as their own and bring it to life in community.

Grief Support Sharing Circles



As is true for many of us, the pivot to offering the grief support circle online this year had me worried. How do we hold digital space in a way that enables students to share their grief stories? Can we replicate our closing ritual of lighting a candle in honour of our healing and naming our deceased loved one name(s)? What happens when the internet connection drops right in the middle of someone's sharing?

Well, the internet did fail, but the participants carried right on! These online circles became sacred spaces very quickly, where students shared with courage and vulnerability. We even had waiting lists and a request to add further sessions.

Covid has made grief hard and complicated and extra lonely. One student had both parents die of Covid-19. Another was unable to say goodbye to their mom as she died in the hospital during the pandemic. Another student just moved to Toronto to study and the isolation/loneliness of the pandemic heightened her grief over the death of her sibling several years ago.

This digital circle provided a place of connection and understanding for students. I am grateful to have been trusted with their stories, tears, and even occasional laughter.

Jeanette Unger

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ECOLOGY AND SPIRITUALITY

BY FATIMA ZAHRA MOHAMMED, STUDENT INTERN



Two crucial themes in my life are my faith and my passion for the environment, and I leap at every opportunity to merge them. Through the Ecumenical Chaplaincy, I was able to do just that, in my role as the Ecology and Spirituality intern for the Multi-Faith Centre. Growing up, I was always taught about the world around me through the lens of my Muslim faith, recognizing the beauty of the environment as a constant reminder of God's creation and mercy. Entering university, these interwoven aspects of my identity became somewhat

detached, as I studied the environment and forestry through secular and scientific lenses and engaged deeply in spirituality through the Muslim Students Association, and Muslim Chaplaincy on campus. I knew there was something missing in having my faith and environmentalism run parallel with one another and embarking on this internship allowed me to reunite them.

In November of 2019, I attended a guest lecture on eco-anxiety, and Dr. John Robinson spoke about the rising population of the world that identifies religion as a core tenet of their life. He argued that trying to encourage environmentalism without relating it to faith is like trying to sell something and not speaking the same language. This has stuck with me ever since, and I was surprised to consider that not everybody has identified environmentalism as deeply connected to faith. For my internship work I was given complete creative freedom and decided that this would be my anchor. I wanted to know more about this relationship, and focused my scope to the three Abrahamic Religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

What followed was 7 months of working with Jewish, Christian and Muslim student groups and scholars, to organize a three-part series, each delving into how environmentalism relates to their scripture and practice. Reflecting on this internship, I'm immensely grateful for the experience and the many lessons I learnt from it. One of my biggest takeaways and consistent reminders is that despite our perceived differences, the environment has great potential to be a common ground for interfaith work. During every meeting, conversation and lecture that I attended throughout this process, I noticed that the way in which creation and nature is discussed is echoed similarly in each of the Abrahamic Faiths. Language around stewardship, blessings and God's mercy are important themes for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In a social atmosphere that emphasizes our differences, it was refreshing to see that environmentalism creates space for our similarities to be celebrated.

The conversations I had throughout this experience will stay with me as I continue working at the intersection of faith and the environment, and it's the moments when people made the connection between the two that stand out as highlights for me. One attendee at the session on Christianity shared that she never saw her religion relating to environmentalism, but that it makes a lot of sense now that she connected the dots. Being able to facilitate those connections and highlight these profound relationships that are already woven into our traditions is so exciting and rewarding. These lessons and conversations serve as reminders of the power of interfaith work, I look forward to carrying them with me in the future, and I'm grateful for this opportunity to explore just a taste of the great potential of faith-based environmentalism.