The Witness of the Student Christian Movement

Robin Boyd

As we approach the centenary of the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, so often characterized as the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, it is well to recall that the primary goal of Edinburgh was not the unity of Christians but the evangelization of the world. Christian unity was certainly seen as important, and indeed a great deal of practical interchurch cooperation in mission had already been achieved through the practice of “comity” in countries like India, but it was always “unity-for-mission.” And the primary initiators of Edinburgh 1910 were the young leaders of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Edinburgh 1910—and all that flowed from it—would not have happened without the SCM.

Young People Together for Mission

The early history of the Christian student movement is well documented. Young people began it: like Samuel Mills and his friends at Williams College (Williamstown, Mass.) in 1808. Its history continues through the foundation of the YMCA (London, 1844), D. L. Moody’s evangelistic campaigns in the 1870s and 1880s, the “Cambridge Seven,” Grace and Robert Wilder’s work from 1883, and the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) of 1888. Especially significant is the contribution of Scotland’s Henry Drummond (1851–97). The more recent history of the movement, through the tempestuous 1960s and 1970s, is covered by Risto Lehtonen’s (1851–97). The present article, based mainly on the British SCM, attempts topically rather than chronologically to identify those features of the life and witness of the movement—and of those molded by it—that have justified its description as “the church ahead of the church.”

The SCM was, and is, a movement of young people. In its “golden age” in the 1950s it provided a remarkable symbiosis of students in their late teens and early twenties, facilitated but not directed by a group of traveling secretaries a few years older, and with a headquarters staff of whom not more than one or two were out of their thirties. The headquarters staff in turn had close links with young lecturers in university faculties, who were in touch with the leading scholars in the land, not just in theology, but across the whole range of academia. They also had easy contact with the leading scholars in the land, not just in theology, but across the whole range of academia. The service of the mind — would not have happened without the SCM.

Marks of the Movement

A number of closely intertwined emphases have been distinctive of the movement throughout its history.

The centrality of Christ. In the stormy days of 1971 Martin Conway drew up a list of the marks of what the SCM tradition has always sought to do. The first is “to have, as its central thrust, the purpose of testing out the truth of Jesus Christ and of his calling.” This mark ensured a decisive emphasis on the Bible, and also on academic integrity, Paul’s “service of the mind” (logike latreia, Rom. 12:1).

The Bible. Bible study was basic to the movement from the start. In the early days the Bible was studied devotionally, but by the 1920s the emphasis was more on an optimistic “Kingdom-building.” By the beginning of World War II in 1939, the mood had changed, mainly through the German church’s struggle against the absolute claims of the Nazi state. In 1933, in the WSCF’s quarterly journal, Student World, Hanns Lilje, general secretary of the German SCM, openly affirmed the Christian’s duty to protest against the absolutization of nation and state. When the state decided to force the movement to apply the “Aryan Paragraph” to its members—meaning the exclusion of all non-Aryans (i.e., Jews) from its activities—Lilje and Reinhold Von Thadden (chairperson) decided that they must step down as officers. The SCM courageously reinstated them, with the result that in August 1938 the government banned the movement.

This German story was gradually unveiled to students returning from war service to the universities of Europe in 1945 and was a challenge to Bible study in the SCM. The most significant figure in this area is Suzanne de Diétrich, friend and colleague of Karl Barth and Willem Visser ‘t Hooft. Her book The Rediscovery of the Bible encouraged students, in a phrase attributed to Barth, to study with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. In the British SCM, through study secretaries like Alan Richardson and Davis McCaughy, and with Ronald Gregor Smith at the SCM Press, a stream of study outlines backed up by commentaries from leading biblical scholars made Bible study a mind-stretching experience.

The service of the mind. The SCM’s tradition of academic integrity went back to Henry Drummond. In his evangelistic work with Moody in 1873, Drummond had not yet wrestled with the theological issues raised by critical biblical scholarship and evolutionary science. By 1884, however, he had come to accept, and to advocate, an attitude of openness, and it was largely because of his perceived honesty in this regard that university students all over the world flocked to hear him. Moody also always supported him. Drummond’s legacy to the SCM was the freedom to ask awkward questions: about critical biblical scholarship, evolution, cosmology, or anything else. But it was a freedom that insisted on finding out the best sources of information and had no use for do-it-yourself theories or for authoritative teaching handed down from above without allowing questions. John R. Mott and J. H. Oldham impressively demonstrated this approach in the methodology of Edinburgh 1910, and William Temple (1881–1944), “a prophet in close and constant touch with expert advisers,” further developed the approach, helping it to become normative for the SCM.

Mission. The SCM’s roots were in the cross-cultural mission of the church, and in its earliest days it was almost exclusively a

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recruiting agency for overseas missions. Gradually, however, the understanding of the scope of mission was enlarged. At first Mott had deliberately steered the movement away from political issues. But at the vast 1921 Glasgow Quadrennial, a motion was passed repudiating the 1919 massacre of unarmed Indian civilians in Amritsar and sympathizing with the Indian movement’s aspirations for Indian self-government.11 It was the first political message sent by the SCM to another movement. Temple maintained that the important political work of the 1924 Conference on Christian Politics, Economics, and Citizenship (COPEC) was the direct result of a 1909 SCM conference on Christianity and social problems. The postwar movement had entered the field of political and social affairs, and there it would remain.

But the particular pays de mission of the SCM is the university, and gradually its leaders came to realize that it was not enough to evangelize individual students—the university itself must be brought into the context of the Gospel. A major effort to define the Christian mission in the university, perhaps the most thorough since John Henry Newman’s Idea of a University (1852), was made by the SCM in the 1940s and 1950s through the work of writers like David Paton, Arnold Nash, Walter Moberly, and John Coleman. The theme “Christian Obedience in the University” (also the title of Davis McCaughey’s 1958 book) was an integral part of the SCM’s mission.

Church, unity, and worship. In its earliest days the SCM was frankly nondenominational—a tradition still largely continued in the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), whose parent organization, InterVarsity Fellowship (IVF), separated from the SCM in 1927. When Mott, Oldham, and Tissington Tatlow, secretary of the British movement, were setting up the Edinburgh 1910 conference, they realized the need to secure the cooperation of churches as well as missionary societies, of the Anglo-Catholic Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) as well as the evangelical Church Missionary Society (CMS). Through the ready advocacy of Archbishop Randall Davidson of Canterbury they managed to gain this support. And Mott went on immediately, in 1911, to win the blessing of the ecumenical patriarch of the Orthodox Church when the WSCF held a great conference in Constantinople (now Istanbul). The SCM was taking the church (and the churches) seriously, somewhat to the consternation of both evangelicals and liberals. Meantime the follow-up of Edinburgh gave rise not only to the International Missionary Council but also to the Life and Work Movement and, more surprisingly (since many were saying that “doctrine divides but service unites”), to Faith and Order. In South India negotiations for a union of churches across the Anglican/Reformed/Methodist divide began in 1919, negotiations in which the SCM’s Lesslie Newbigin would later play a vital role. The modern ecumenical movement was under way, and in 1948 the streams of Life and Work and Faith and Order combined to form the World Council of Churches (WCC). In all of this the SCM tradition played a notable part, and the successive service at the WCC of people like Visser’t Hooft, William Paton, Lesslie Newbigin, Oliver Tomkins, and Philip Potter led to the jibe that the WCC was simply “the SCM in long trousers.”

Prayer was also a strong feature of the movement’s beginnings, mainly in the form of personal devotional prayer and shared intercession rather than through the liturgical worship of the church. In 1915 A Book of Prayers for Students was issued, which was much used for many years. In 1925 Oldham published A Devotional Diary, and in 1950 SCM Press brought out Student Prayer.

Already in 1924 Suzanne Bidgrain of France had provided the student world with the multilingual hymnbook Cantate Domino, containing hymns from all the major traditions, including the French “Thine Be the Glory,” by Edmond Louis Budry, which in effect became the anthem of the federation. The third edition (1951) was even more representative of the worldwide church, and for fifty years this hymnbook—the WSCF’s most widely used publication—was the hymnbook of the ecumenical movement.

In 1934 Venite Adoremus I, a collection of non-Eucharistic services from five church traditions, was printed in English, French, and German. The second edition (1951) marked a significant change of policy by printing four services of Holy Communion: Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and Orthodox. The preface indicates the thinking behind this new departure: “The Federation is not the Church nor a church. . . . The General Committee considers the Holy Communion to be of central importance in Christian faith and life. Consequently, in Federation meetings opportunity should be provided for participation in Holy Communion by all present.” The federation was not the church, but it was “church,” sharing the church’s life, working for mission and unity, and in its own koine, anticipating the joy of Christians fully united in Christ.

International relief work. Four years after Edinburgh 1910 came the appalling carnage of World War I. The WSCF took a leading role in the relief of suffering among students. In the postwar reconstruction of university and student life, the most significant name is that of Ruth Rouse of England, who with her American colleague Conrad Hoffmann developed a vast and effective organization to this end called European Student Relief. It was the pioneer of all later international Christian relief organizations like Christian Aid and Tearfund.

Women’s ministry. Women were part of the movement from the beginning, and their contribution gradually became an equal partnership. Ruth Rouse and John R. Mott formed what Suzanne de Diétrich calls “a magnificent alliance . . . inspired by the same faith and the same vision of the world,”12 and Rouse went on to become the historian of both the federation and the ecumenical movement. Tissington Tatlow would never have been able to achieve what he did without Zoë Fairfield, whom colleagues called the brain behind the movement, while “T squared” was the brilliant administrator.

Some churches, notably the Congregational churches in both the United States and Great Britain, had had women ministers since the 1920s, and the Reverend Gwennyth Hubble of the Baptist Church was assistant general secretary of the British SCM from 1939 to 1946. But it was the exigencies of wartime Hong Kong that provided the occasion, in 1944, for the first ordination of a woman, Florence Li, to the priesthood in the Anglican communion. The bishop who took the courageous step of ordaining her was R. O. Hall, and the first people he reported to were Tissington Tatlow and Billy Greer (then bishop of Manchester).14 all three of
them SCM people prepared to risk acting as “the church ahead of the church.”

The general, churchwide movement for women’s ordination, however, did not really take off until the 1960s. When it did, many of those who became well known as leaders—such as Mary Lusk (Levison),15 chief wrestler in the struggle with the Church of Scotland on this issue, and Margaret Falconer (Webster),16 founding general secretary (1979–86) of the Church of England’s Movement for the Ordination of Women (MOW)—had come through the SCM.

Race. The federation tackled the issue of racial discrimination in the United States as early as 1897, two years after its founding. Christian unions had been formed in both white and black American colleges, but the movements had not been able to arrange for black students to be present at white conferences or vice versa. A WSCF conference at Williamstown, Massachusetts, in 1897 included people from many races, making it possible for African-American students to attend.17 A principle had been established; racial issues would still be high on the agenda, but only because the whole movement was fighting against discrimination.

Over the years, many of the federation’s most outstanding leaders have come from a non-European background. And in places where battles had to be fought against racist governments, some of the leading fighters for justice came from the SCM: people like Bishop Ambrose Reeves of South Africa, expelled by the government in 1962 for his anti-apartheid views, and Sir Ronald Wilson, the Australian judge who, together with the Aboriginal leader Mick Dodson, led the national inquiry into the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities. Wilson and Dodson also coauthored the devastating 1997 report Bringing Them Home.

Lay leadership. From the beginning the SCM was largely led by laypeople. Mott was a layman, so was Robert E. Speer of the SVM, Joe Oldham, M. M. Thomas of India, Martin Conway of England, and nearly all of the women who served the movement in the days when ordination was not an option for them. In Martin Conway’s words, the SCM “sought to insist on the lay leadership of students and teachers, with chaplains and other ecclesiastics at best serving and provoking others to play a larger part.”18

Political and social issues. The movement’s commitment to political and social justice as an integral part of the church’s mission can be seen in what has already been said about racial justice, about William Temple and COPEC, Joe Oldham and Life and Work, the German church struggle, and women’s ministry. This commitment can also be seen in such areas as the work of the British movement’s industrial department and its outcome in the Sheffield Industrial Mission (1944), and in the pioneering work of Christian social ethicists like Ronald Preston. Even the story of the politicization of the movement in “the Storm,” the crisis discussed in the next section, can be seen as an attempt to “risk Christ for Christ’s sake.”19

Interfaith dialogue. In 1913 J. N. Farquhar, a young Scottish secretary of the Indian YMCA (closely associated with the SCM), published The Crown of Hinduism, which, though assuming that the Christian faith was the highest in a hierarchy of faiths, nevertheless manifested a gentle, scholarly, and nonaggressive attitude toward Hinduism. A few years later the Anglican missionary C. F. Andrews became a close friend of Mahatma Gandhi; Andrews also became a staunch supporter of Indian independence and a sympathetic interpreter of Hinduism. In 1918 he visited and greatly influenced SCM conferences in both Britain and Australia.

Not until about 1960, however, did the word “dialogue” begin to be used in the context of interfaith relations. One of the first people to use the term in that sense was Paul Devanandan, a friend of the Indian SCM, whose book The Gospel and Renascent Hinduism appeared from the SCM Press in 1959 and was followed in 1964 by Preparation for Dialogue. Later, the distinguished Indian lay theologian and activist M. M. Thomas, who had served with both the Indian SCM and the federation, joined the staff of the WCC, where over the years he worked, against considerable odds, to introduce interfaith dialogue as an integral part of the council’s program. For Thomas and for his fellow Indian successor Stanley Samartha, dialogue was not an alternative to evangelism; rather, it was the living out and speaking out of the Gospel in the context of friendship.

**Two Crises**

In writing about the SCM, it is impossible not to deal, at least briefly, with two major crises: first, the split with the IVF; second, “the Storm,” the near collapse of the movement in a number of Western countries in the late 1960s.

*The parting of the ways.* As far back as the founding of the YMCA in 1844, students had been divided by an intellectual conflict between religious orthodoxy and a liberalism that sought accommodation with the claims of natural science. The movement’s earlier days, influenced by Drummond, were strongly evangelical, but they were not conservative in the sense of being unwilling to face the implications of biblical criticism or of insisting on a particular interpretation of Christian doctrine. The Cambridge Intercollegiate Christian Union (CICCU) was an older organization than the SCM; it had affiliated with the movement in 1893 but disaffiliated in 1910, the year of the Edinburgh conference. This separation, which led to the formation of the IVF in 1927, was not triggered by any sudden radical move but rather by a call to stand still by the more conservative members of the movement, who were afraid of where the SCM’s type of open-minded biblical interpretation might take them. It was a sad division, quite as grave as any between the churches. Efforts to heal the breach were made in 1919, mainly through the initiative of the SCM, and again in 1950, when the leaders of the two movements met for a whole day in London but were unable to find any way of cooperation, even in shared Bible study or prayer. With the later globalization of the two movements—the SCM through the growth of the ecumenical movement and the IVF through the worldwide spread of the tradition of the 1974 Lausanne Covenant—the task of reconciliation has become both more difficult and more urgent.

*“The Storm.”* The decade from about 1965 to 1975 was a time of revolutionary student unrest. The civil rights movement in the United States was paralleled in places like South Africa and Northern Ireland; in Latin America there were base communi-
ties and the activism of liberation theology; and the Vietnam War provoked antwar protests. Students were looking for "liberation from paternalism and authoritarian and hierarchical structures."20

The most critical year was 1968, with the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., the "Prague Spring" in Czechoslovakia, and the "May Revolution" in France. It was also a critical year for the federation. At a WSCF conference at Turku, Finland, the carefully prepared program, which seemed radical enough to the organ-

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izers, was jettisoned by the students. What was described as "pure" or "transcendentalist" theology was repudiated as "part of the ideological system which justifies oppression."21 There was opposition also to the planned worship, much to the confusion of the African delegates. Richard Shaull, chairman of the federation, with experience in Latin America, found much that was encouraging "on the road to a new theology, a new university, authentic politics of social reconstruction."22 Lehtonen, however, by then general secretary, sought the advice of the national SCMs and some senior friends. It was a choice, he said, between global revolution on the one hand, in which Christian students would join forces with the working class, and, on the other, a movement seen primarily as "an expression of the Christian community—the Church—in the academic world."23 The response of the veteran French SCM leader André Dumas is a classic expression of the SCM tradition: "In my opinion, there are certain irreplaceable contributions which cannot be made without the Christian faith: its witness to God makes the worship of an ideology impossible, … its practice of justification by faith makes impossible sectarian self-justification. Finally, in seeking reconciliation, which is the opposite of separation, Christian faith brings freedom from the negativity of terrorists."24

But the majority of student leaders in the European and American movements were reluctant to listen to the counsel of senior friends, however distinguished or radical. The SCM had become focused on a single issue—the very fault for which it had criticized the IVF—but its single issue was purely political, and the movement's traditional and essential links with Bible, theology, church, and mission were weakened. The movement lost a great deal of support from the churches and went into a steep decline, and its characteristic radical, biblical, and ecumenical infow of qualified young women and men committed not only to mission (in its widest sense) and Christian unity but also to a never-ceasing quest for academic integrity applied to faith.

Children of the SCM

It is my earnest hope that the SCM may be renewed and transformed and become once again "the church ahead of the church." But even if that should not happen, the SCM tradition is alive and well, having borne much fruit. We have seen some major examples of the SCM tradition in the World Council of Churches and in united and uniting churches. Then there are the great Christian relief organizations, such as Christian Aid and Tearfund. There are ecumenical centers like that of the WCC at Bossey in Switzerland. Another historically linked ecumenical enterprise is the Taizé Community, whose SCM roots are often forgotten. In April 1940 the French-speaking Swiss SCM held a retreat that led to a movement of students who wanted to pray for peace. Its organizer was Roger Schutz, a young Swiss SCM leader and pastor in the Reformed Church, who later that year founded the Taizé Community, today perhaps the world’s best-known center of ecumenical worship.25

The SCM tradition can also be observed in the German Kirchentag, which was first held in Berlin in 1949 by Reinold von Thadden and brought together 2,000 laypeople from both parts of a divided country. In June 2003 the Kirchentag met in a reunited Berlin, and for the first time the Roman Catholics, who had previously held their own separate Katholikentag, shared in the event—a gathering of more than 200,000 laypeople, with the blessing of both traditions. Years earlier von Thadden had told Visser ’t Hooft that through the Kirchentag he “wanted to bring into the life of every congregation what he had learned and received in the SCM, the WSCF and the WCC about a radical, world-transforming Christianity with an ecumenical perspective."26 In the field of Christian publication the SCM Press continues to flourish, though it is now an independent concern (SCM/Canterbury Press). These are only a few examples of the SCM’s numerous and healthy progeny.

Conclusion

I offer four observations by way of conclusion.

First, the SCM has been a major Christian movement, whose full significance for the mission and unity of the worldwide church has not yet been fully recorded, let alone assessed. Its methods of organization and conferencing are still a significant feature of Christian public life. It pioneered a method of Bible study—an ecumenical hermeneutic leading to action—that is of continuing effectiveness.

Second, the 1920s division between the SCM tradition and that of the IFES has damaged Christian witness and service. The time is ripe for people on both sides of what is now a global divide to work for reconciliation, and the best place to begin could well be in a shared turning to the Bible and its interpretation.

Third, while the SCM tradition continues to flourish in many countries, its decline in the West is acutely felt in the place where it matters most: the university. The virtual absence of its strong and lively presence for more than thirty years has deprived the universities of an intentional ecumenical koinonia directed toward mission and unity, and it has deprived the church of a steady inflow of qualified young women and men committed not only to mission (in its widest sense) and Christian unity but also to a never-ceasing quest for academic integrity applied to faith.

Fourth, the ecumenical, eschatological vision of Christian life and mission is more than ever vital for the church. The SCM is still a lively, if diminished, presence in the university—aware of, inspired by, and wary of its past. If it should regain its strength or be transformed or replaced by something even better, there would be joy in heaven! But whatever happens to the SCM itself, the church, as well as the world, still needs the tradition.
the harvest is plentiful

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Notes
1. The series of decennial missionary conferences in India, beginning in 1872, foreshadowed Edinburgh 1910.
2. Of the three main organizers, Mott was 45, Oldham 36, and Tatlow 34. The earlier British College Christian Union officially adopted the name “Student Christian Movement” in 1905. In the period leading up to Edinburgh, the YMCA, YWCA, SVM (Student Volunteer Movement), and SCM acted as virtually one fellowship.
6. “Poisoning the student mind” was the chorus of an ad hoc song popular at SCM conferences.
16. Webster, *New Strength*.
21. Ibid., p. 74.
24. Ibid., p. 167.