

## Student Leadership Inspires Justice, Community, and Spirituality on Campuses

*by David Ball*

Contrary to some opinions, social justice activism is very much alive today on Canada's post-secondary campuses. Our vision in the Student Christian Movement (SCM) is to fan some of these embers and inspire sparks that can transform our faith, our communities, and our world. From the local to global level, students are active in living out a liberating theology, and making a difference faithfully in our world.



Founded in 1921 in the Canadian social gospel movement, SCM is a student-led movement passionate about justice, community, and spirituality. Our local units across the country connect faith and social change in practical and inspiring ways—whether it's political Bible studies, film festivals, anti-war hip-hop shows, vigils, or discussion groups. It is not always easy to recruit students, since often we are too Christian for the activists and too activist for the Christians. But we thrive in this in-between space, where true change can happen in our lives. We see students' lives transformed through our lively ecumenical community.

“My experience of the Student Christian Movement has provided me with such a sense of knowing deep inside a bit of what a transformed world might look like,” says Sheryl Johnson in Toronto, one of two elected National Representatives, or chairs, of the movement. “We engage with political, social, and spiritual issues...to live into the transformed social order we yearn for and pray to create.”

On the grassroots level, a dozen local units are autonomous groups of students active in issues of local concern, supported by our allied chaplains. We all gather for our National Conference and Council every spring, which is a unique ecumenical event—with students from many beliefs and backgrounds (Catholic, United, Anglican, Mennonite, Lutheran, Evangelical, and even non-Christian backgrounds), uniting in a shared passion for justice, prayer, and action.

One of our programs is a Pilgrimage of Resistance every November, on which we journey to the gates of a notorious U.S. army training base, the School of the Americas in Georgia, and participate in a 25,000-strong human rights vigil at the gates. In this way, students are exposed to liberation theology, social gospel, and one of the largest social movements today in North America.

Thanks to funding from The United Church of Canada, the elected student board—our vision is to develop leaders among students, the next generation—is able to have a national office and country-wide programs, produce creative faith-and-justice resources, and employ a small staff (myself included). But the students are truly the leaders.

Another important program is our Queer & Christian Without Contradiction campaign. We are at the forefront in Canada working to challenge homophobia and support LGBT students on campuses, from a spiritual base. So many students have told us that our message of liberation, acceptance, and celebration has freed them to experience their faith again.

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On the global level, SCM is a proud member of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), which was instrumental in founding the World Council of Churches. This year, we hosted the WSCF's General Assembly in Montreal, where students from every imaginable church background and more than 100 countries deliberated, worshipped, and recommitted ourselves to global solidarity.

After 87 years, SCM is looking forward to fuelling passion for faith and justice among today's and tomorrow's student generations, as we continue to work for ecumenical unity and liberation for all. "It's absolutely wild and wonderful that we're able to come together, uniting in solidarity and support," says Bre Woligroski, a student involved in SCM in Winnipeg. "SCM definitely makes a huge impact in people's lives."

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