

The Zeitgeist in Movement: An Interview with

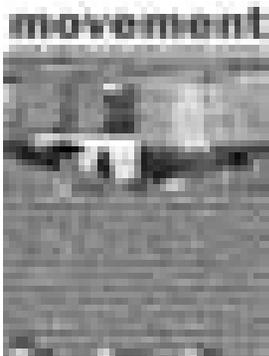
Dear Liam, when one clicks on the homepage of SCM United Kingdom and the *movement* magazine, one discovers in the upper right corner of the website a link to the MakePovertyHistory campaign. That goes very well with the theme of this issue of *Mozaik*, which deals with different aspects of *modern poverty*. Why this connection between *movement* and SCM UK on one hand and the MakePovertyHistory campaign on the other?

I'm proud to say that, here in the UK, churches and Christian organisations have led the way in getting issues of economic injustice talked about by politicians and the general public. It was the churches which launched the Jubilee 2000 campaign in 1999, calling on the developed nations to cancel the unjust debts which are crippling developing countries. They've since been heavily involved in campaigning to get international trade rules changed, and to get more and better aid supplied to developing countries.

Why does all this matter so much to SCM UK? Our vision statement says that faith and social justice cannot be separated. We believe we have a responsibility to speak out against economic injustice, to stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed elsewhere in the world. And as members of one of the most privileged and affluent societies in the world, we have to acknowledge that our comfortable lifestyle carries a high price for people in developing countries, and to look for ways of changing that.

While SCM UK has a reputation for

being radical and on the fringe of the conventional church, all the mainstream Christian denominations here have also thrown themselves behind the MakePovertyHistory campaign. It was inspiring to see banners hanging on all the churches last summer, when the leaders of the G8 wealthy nations were meeting in their heavily fortified hotel in Scotland.



It's important that the churches make a stand like this to show that the neo-liberal economic model is not opposed only by extremists, while also reflecting Biblical principles. The idea of jubilee from the Old Testament inspired the campaign for debt cancellation, and soli-

darity with the poor and oppressed is fundamental to the message of Jesus and the prophets.

What do you personally see as the main fields of action for young Christians in the struggle against modern poverty in the United Kingdom?

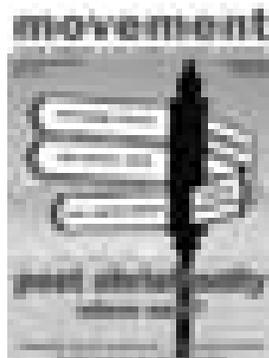
Firstly, the struggle against global poverty and injustice continues. The G8 leaders made some promises in Edinburgh last year, but they didn't go far enough, and politicians' promises are easily broken. So SCMer and other young Christians continue to be involved in MakePovertyHistory-type campaigning.

Over the last year, we've focused

especially on HIV, pressing our government to meet its commitment to ensure universal access to HIV treatment by 2010. The UK government is particularly well placed to make this happen, and has shown more willingness to tackle this very important issue than many other Western governments.

But we need to look at poverty in our own society too. Inequality has grown and grown in the UK over the last few decades, and poverty and social exclusion are very real issues for many, even in such a wealthy country. An issue which I think should be of particular concern for Christians is that of refugees and asylum-seekers.

The right-wing press in the UK continually print misinformation and xenophobic, sensationalist stories about immigrants and asylum-seekers, creating a very real climate of fear and hatred. The government make things worse, with policies which victimise people who are already fleeing terror and torture. Many asylum-seekers in the UK are now forced into destitution by these policies, and I think it's essential for young Christians to speak out and to support these marginalised people.



Movement is a magazine sensitive to the issues of our time; attentive to the Zeitgeist. How do you choose your priorities and the themes of individual issues of *movement*?

SCM UK places great importance on being led by our student members, and the magazine is no exception. SCM UK has a gathering every term,

Liam PURCELL has been editor of *movement* since 2002 and co-ordinator

of the UK Student Christian Movement since 2004. He's studied English language and literature and has a

postgraduate diploma in publishing. He came to SCM and WSCF late in life he missed out on it completely

as a student, but has been making up for lost time since he started editing the magazine!



Liam Purcell

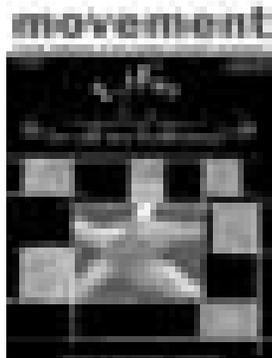
hosted by a local student group or chaplaincy. All our groups and members are invited to attend. As well as speakers, worship and time to socialise, we have meetings of working groups which plan SCM's policies and activities, including *movement*. Everyone at the gathering is entitled to take part in any of these groups and have a say. So the students get to make decisions about our events, our social justice campaigns, and the content of the magazine.

We usually plan out the general themes for each issue about a year in advance, and then plan each issue in detail about a term before its publication. Of course, the exact details of writers and articles can vary quite a lot, once it comes down to actually commissioning things. The line-up of articles can keep changing right up to the last minute, causing me some sleepless nights on occasion! I have a diploma in publishing, but none of my lectures told me what to do when one of your writers misses a deadline because their father has driven a tractor off a cliff.

The latest issue of *movement* is the issue No. 123. That tells us there is quite a bit of history behind the magazine. Please, tell the readers more about the origins and history of the magazine. When did it all start and how has *movement* evolved throughout the years?

SCM had had various short-lived publications before, but it decided to start printing a regular, professional-quality magazine in the early '70s. They recruited editorial staff who'd had experience working on radical and Christian magazines in the U.S. and elsewhere, and *movement* was born. Or rather, *Bilbo* was born. The first issue was named after

the main character in J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *The Hobbit*, which was very popular in UK student Christian circles at the time! The name was soon changed to *movement*, though.



Movement has caused its share of controversy. In the '70s, SCM UK included a series of political pamphlets in the magazine. One of them was banned by the government because it contained instructions for members of the armed forces on how they could desert in protest if they didn't want to

serve in Northern Ireland.

The magazine's gone through many changes in terms of content, style and presentation over the years. In its early days you were likely to find details of seminars on Marxism alongside interviews with radical activists; today there'll be interviews with TV personalities and even some Christian liturgy materials, alongside the radical politics!

But there is some continuity in terms of the approach. When the editors of the time did a retrospective for the one hundredth issue, they identified the common strand as 'liberation'. Whether it's in theology, politics, culture or just the sense of humour, I think that sums up *movement* pretty well.

It's a unique publication, both within the international community of SCMs and within the Christian community in the UK. Many non-students subscribe to it because there simply isn't another magazine with the same mix of politics, theology, culture and irreverent humour. I'm proud to be working on it.

What was your personal highlight in your "career" as the editor-in-chief of *movement*?

After we published an issue with



a special feature on sex and sexuality, I received a letter from a student reader which reminded me why I'm doing this job. The person wrote to thank us because they'd been struggling with a lot of questions about these issues, in the context of a very conservative and repressive church. Reading our feature, they discovered for the first time that they weren't alone, that there were people tackling these questions with integrity whilst still holding onto their Christian faith.

That was very moving for me. In SCM UK, we can get rather blasé about some of the 'standard' issues for liberal Christians. We've been addressing issues of sexuality for so long now we helped to found the UK Lesbian and Gay Christian movement in the eighties that we can feel there's no more to be said. That letter reminded me that SCM's voice, speaking out for openness and inclusivity, is still vitally needed in the UK's churches.

Who were the celebrities appearing in *movement*, either in interviews or as contributors?

In my time, we've interviewed a few 'big names,' but they're not really filmstar-type celebrities. We're more likely to talk to people who've presented interesting documentaries on TV, or journalists with controversial opinions. I was rather starstruck, though, when I got to meet the activist singer-songwriter Billy Bragg, who's a hero of mine!

I can reveal that we should be printing an interview soon with Norman Kember, one of the Christian Peacemakers who was held hostage in Iraq. (This was big news in the UK, but I guess people will have heard about it in other countries too.) It turns out

that he was an SCMer in his student days, so it'll be interesting to see if it was SCM that radicalised him and set him on the path he's taken.

We also had a column for a while from Anita Roddick, the founder of The Body Shop. She talked about activism, ethical living and spirituality she had an interesting perspective because she isn't a Christian but cares about the same issues as many of our members. I was subsequently disappointed to hear about her selling off The Body Shop to L'Oréal, a company with a rather less ethical approach than the one she pioneered in her work. Maybe I'll invite her to return some day and justify her actions to our readers ...

One of the sections in *movement* that I like a lot is called *Celebrity Theologian*. It is a very ecumenical section: it contains profiles of, e.g., Julian of Norwich, Ignatius of Loyola, Dietrich BONHÖFFER or Karl BARTH. I even found the Muslim philosopher Al-GHAZALI among the presented thinkers.

Indeed. We've also looked at secular figures such as GALILEO, to see how their thinking had an impact on theology. It's probably the most 'educational' part of the magazine it really aims to introduce big ideas in a way that young people with no theological training can understand.

We now occasionally run a similar feature called 'Doctrine for Dummies,' which introduces key aspects

of Christian belief in the same way. We wanted to demonstrate how there are many approaches and ideas within the Christian tradition; very rarely is there one right answer, however much some Christians might try to claim that there is.

Along which lines should Christian media, such as *movement* or *Mozaik*, create their policies, in order to stay both popular and influential on one hand and to be an alternative to secular media on the other? In other words, how should they combine their specific Christian character with the *Zeitgeist*?

I always find this kind of question difficult to answer. We rarely sit down and calculate the balance of Christian to secular material in the magazine, or try to work out how to express a Christian view on a subject. I hope that the approach and content of the magazine just flow naturally from the things our members and writers are interested in, as Christians with a Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

One thing which I think may have helped *movement* to keep its distinctive voice during my editorship is my own faith position. I grew up Catholic, but stopped attending church for many years. I attend a Quaker meeting nowadays, but am still very much on the fringes of traditional Christianity. So I care about the Christian tradition and the Church, and I understand its

structures, but I often find I feel like an outsider. Perhaps that helps me to strike a balance between the secular world and a Christian view. I certainly think it's very important that SCM UK creates a space where people like me can be part of a community alongside more traditional Christians.

And lastly, maybe a little controversial, but certainly relevant question. ARISTOTLE claims that the human is by nature a *zoon politikon*. How political, therefore, should a Christian be?

I have to quote Desmond TUTU here: 'I am puzzled about which Bible people are reading when they suggest religion and politics don't mix.' I believe in God's preferential option for the poor, I believe the Bible is a massively political text, and I believe it's impossible to live out a meaningful faith without engaging with the real world and trying to make it a better place.

I think this is particularly the case for organisations like WSCF, which are part of the ecumenical movement. The root word of 'ecumenism', *oikoumene*, literally means 'the whole inhabited world.' So the call from the gospel 'that they may all be one' is a call for Christians to work for the unity of the whole world, not just the church. That means building a just and equal society, it means protecting the environment, and it means being open to what we can learn from other cultures and traditions. If that isn't political, I don't know what is.