

Jubilee Grapevine

Spring 2002



Sustainability: living within means

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This issue of JG was edited by Narelle McAuliffe.
jg@ascm.org.au

The views expressed in this magazine are not necessarily the views of the editor or the ASCM as a whole.

As requested by the Council of Christians and Jews, JG uses the terms Hebrew and Greek Scriptures instead of Old and New Testaments.

This issue has been printed on 100% recycled paper.

Webweaver's Report

I am currently getting the ASCM website up to scratch, so now would be an excellent opportunity for people to express any ideas they have for it. If you would like pages about a particular topic, tell me! If you have contributions, give them to me!

The email lists have undergone significant changes. We are now being hosted on a different server, and so can use our own domain name once more. July General Committee also made some decisions about what these lists should be used for:

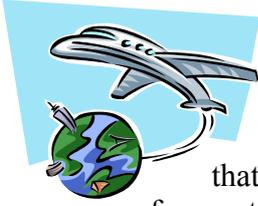
The <chat_list@ascm.org.au> is for philosophical, theological, and general discussion. To subscribe, send an email to <imailsrv@ascm.org.au> with nothing in the subject field, and 'subscribe scm chat' in the body of the message.

The <policy_list@ascm.org.au> is for administration, policy and decision-making. To subscribe, send an email to <webweaver@ascm.org.au> asking to join the policy list.

In addition, each state has or is going to set up its own local list. This is for announcements about what is going on at a state level, and also events that affect the national movement as a whole. All this information will be on the new and exciting website: <www.ascm.org.au>. So join us online!

Rachael Palmer

Simplicity and Aeroplanes



I have become disturbed to discover that I am an increasingly frequent flyer. On average, I probably fly over 25,000km per year. I live in Perth and my immediate family, and many of my friends, live scattered around the country. Then there are trips for the national committee that I am on. I love the freedom of being able to get away and be involved in things elsewhere.

There is no way that travel of this nature is remotely sustainable. Our earth cannot continue providing the amount of non-renewable resources required to fly me around, especially not if more and more people want to be in on this sort of lifestyle.

Do I then cease to fly? My initial reaction to this dilemma was to see it as a life *without*. That is, a life without easy access to my family, without reconnections with overseas friends, without involvement in national groups, without freedom of movement, without the opportunity to see and do things outside of my regular experience. I couldn't bear to limit myself in this way.

Recently I was challenged to rethink the whole thing, and made aware of how my initial reaction was not using any creativity. If I was to be serious about reducing my flying, I would have to identify the things that mattered and find alternative ways to reach them. For example, if seeing my parents regularly was a high priority, it would be perfectly possible for me to move to Victoria. To remain in Perth and want to see them regularly could be seen as trying to keep a toe in both pools, which is fine if there is no cost involved, but the cost is to all of us as it contributes to the downward spiral of global degradation.

If I chose not to have the option of flying to other places to enrich my lived experience, would I find more interesting and

challenging experiences close to home? If I cut back on my need to maintain friendships with people who have moved overseas, and put that time and energy (and money!) into really getting to know the people in my street, would I be any less enriched? Would I be fulfilling the call to live in the footsteps of the Divine any less?

Most of the things that I fly for I could, with a little creativity and/or a few hard choices, achieve without flying. I could get our national committee to replace face-to-face meetings with phone-calls and email. I could allow time for bus or train journeys. Maybe using these slower means of transport would enable me to read some of those books on my never-ending list of 'things I will read someday'. Maybe the relationships I could develop with people over multi-day interstate journeys would challenge and inspire me in ways that my busy life with carefully packaged time allotments does not. Maybe I would live more fully in the here and now if I did not allow the option of flying away to reconnect with distant friends. Maybe if I cleared the clutter from my head that is associated with trying to be involved in so many disparate things, I would find a deeper understanding of the God who is at the centre.

And yet even as I write this I know that I am not going to stop flying. Part of me cannot accept that I would be just as fulfilled by my suburban environment as I am by periodically getting far away from it, nor am I convinced that the alternatives to flying would be anything more than inconvenient. I play word games with 'maybe', 'if' and 'I could', but when it comes to action, I am much happier for simplicity to mean having a vegie patch and chickens, taking the bus to work, and buying op-shop clothing. I guess the process of changing focus has a long way to go in me yet.

Clare Schulz

Some Musings On Sustainability

When I saw that the Jubilee Grapevine was to be on the topic of sustainability I thought 'I must write something' because I thought I had something to say. Having read the thoughts on the ASCM email list and heard what happened at the National Conference, I now think that what I have to say is very unimportant and uninformed. I have a few ideas, though, about what it is like to edit a magazine created for a small movement with very busy members. So I humbly offer my thoughts, with the proviso that you accept that they are merely the musings of someone who has grappled with the idea of sustainability for many years and hopes to do so for many more.

I think there can be no doubt that we are living beyond the resources of the earth. The minerals have been here since the earth was formed, but we have no serious plan for making them last the length of time that humans intend to be around. Oil is an energy resource that was laid down eons ago, yet we use it to produce food and for transport at an unsustainable rate. But bound up in the question of sustainability are several issues.

Firstly, there is the issue of social justice. Since the 1970s there has been discussion about what is a sustainable housing standard for the world. The figure I heard bandied about in the '70s was: one room per person, and one extra room. There was no indication of how large these rooms might be, but there was the suggestion that this was a standard of living that was sustainable for the world. As I write this from my 3 bed/2 bath house with two occupants, I know that Western housing is getting bigger and grander, while in the Third World people still live on rubbish dumps with nothing. Our standard of living is unsustainable in social justice terms.

I am interested in the idea of footprints, that there is a social justice and a long-term sustainability component to how much land

we can tie up in supplying resources for each of us individually. While I can think quite calmly about how I ride my bike as much as I am able (being 160km from the metropolitan area is a useful excuse!), how I save water with my modest twin tub, how I am frugal with packaging, etc., there are some very big issues that I find harder to ignore.

We are farmers. I think producing food (in our case, cereals and some meat) is a good thing to do, but to stay competitive, in what is essentially a business, we use very big, very expensive machinery that takes very large amounts of fossil fuels to run. Estimates I have heard suggest that it takes between 2 and 2½ times as much energy to produce grain as is contained in the grain itself. And yet Australians are classed efficient farmers in developed-world terms. This is a dilemma that I cannot solve. We have tried the self-sustainable lifestyle, and it is very hard although very rewarding. But there are other factors at work here. My husband's family has been on this farm for 100 years. We choose not to walk away from that, so must make compromises about what we would like to do and what we can do. Our future is determined by interest rates, world commodity prices and the exchange rate of the Australian and US dollars.



Whilst we plant trees and understorey to alleviate salinity, wind and water erosion, and the loss of habitat and species, I know that what we are doing is ultimately unsustainable. In my more optimistic moments I think that things may not change dramatically, that perhaps we will grow canola to fuel the tractors and things will look much the same. At other times I suspect that in 30 or 50 years the country will not be recognisable. I don't know the

future, but I know that it cannot be the same as the present.

On a personal level, I suspect that the values I see expressed in the world are unsustainable. I am middle-aged. I know this for a variety of reasons, but in part because I see myself between two world views. I see my parents and their generation who save everything and collect string, empty bread bags, bits of rusty wire, almost anything that may have some use at some time. I also go to work and see the younger people who have such a different view of monetary and other resources - 'Spend it, throw it out, why save anything.' It's almost as if tomorrow may not arrive. There are a whole range of issues here, including risk assessment, past experiences and lifestyle choices. There are also a couple of dead ends, I think. One is the belief that we can create security. I believe that it doesn't matter what we own, it can be taken away. No matter how rich we are, we are always vulnerable. There is no guarantee of sustainability. Change is the only certainty.

Another dead end is the belief that possessions can create happiness. Advertisers tell us this constantly, and in our world that so firmly rejects spirituality (unless Bruce Willis is somehow involved perhaps?) we are keen to believe it. Until we figure out that possessions can't change how we feel in any long-term way, we won't change how we live on the earth. We will need to be consumers in the worst meaning of the word.

A final dead end is the cult of the individual. Everyone seems very concerned about their rights, with very little concern about their responsibilities. Emphasis is on the individual, not on the community. While we focus on ourselves alone, sustainability is

not an issue that we can seriously contemplate.

Since I first started to think about it, I have changed what I think sustainability is. Perhaps that is because I am now more affluent. I used to think that it meant we could only have what we ourselves could grow, make or create. That capitalism was bad and that we should be self-reliant. That if we did, we would all have more fulfilling lives and a sustainable future. While I still think there is a great deal of truth in this, and still have a commitment to living it out in whatever ways I can, I don't think this is achievable now. Partly because I don't think that is how people work. We don't want to see the 'big picture'; most of us don't want to take responsibility for our own lives. Most of us would rather be comfortable than right. We will keep doing what we are doing until we begin to suffer for it. Then we might change. Eventually.

Sustainability, I now think, means that we are ready to cope with the next challenge, whatever it is. That we can change the way we live, think and work to fit a new expectation, a new scenario, a new world. Because that is what we will have to do. The problems that our unsustainable lifestyle is creating are not going to go away. Eventually there will be no fossil fuels to put in the tractors and there won't be anymore easily mined ores to create the metal things that we can't live without. Then we must prove ourselves creative, flexible and imaginative. Or disappear. I'm not sure it matters which we do. I suspect that Gaia would breathe a huge sigh of relief if we decided not to change, and just to die out. But somehow I don't think we will.

Diane Hatwell

Meat and the Environment

The meat-eating environmentalist is as much an oxymoron as an animal-loving duck shooter. Will Cuppy

There's nothing 'green' or 'peace'ful about eating animals. Marla, veganstreet.com

The environmental revolution of the early 1990s encouraged us all to take an active interest in environmentalism and highlighted the way our own choices and actions impacted on the world as a whole. Encouraged to 'think global and act local' many people embraced recycling programs, bought organic food, protested against logging and joined action groups. To this day we are encouraged through the mainstream media and environmentalist groups to conserve water, boycott companies who have unsustainable policies, recycle, sign petitions and use public transport. But there's one thing all of us can do for the environment that requires minimal effort, is better on the budget and has a range of benefits for your health: Reduce your meat consumption or cut out meat altogether and go vegetarian.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization linked animal agriculture to a number of environmental problems in a 1996 report. These problems included contamination of aquatic ecosystems, soil, and drinking water, by manure, pesticides, and fertilisers; acid rain from ammonia emissions; greenhouse gas production; and depletion of aquifers for irrigation.

Despite what children's books and the meat industry would have us believe, animals used in meat production no longer roam freely on land that cannot be used for broad acre grain production. Driven by economics and pressure from large agribusiness corporations, an increasing number of farmers are turning to more intensive methods of production. Cattle are now more increasingly being kept in feedlots where they have less room to move and are fed on grain rather than grass. Whilst this affects

the meat and makes it more appealing to certain overseas markets, the impact on the environment is huge. As the cows are kept in a tighter confinement the soil they are on gets compacted more than if they were in a free-range system. This in turn leads to problems with erosion and dust. Pigs and chickens tend to be housed intensively indoors requiring artificial lighting and ventilation systems which are run on electricity, which leads to an increase in air pollution from the burning of fossil fuels. And, of course, methane from animal waste is an issue with around a fifth of the methane production in the world coming from cattle.

Animals produce large amounts of waste; in the US it is estimated that farm animals produce 130 times as much as humans do. When this waste is not treated properly it leads to a number of pollution problems. In particular, it affects local waterways. In 1996, piggeries (rather than factories) were the biggest polluter of Sydney waterways due to effluent run-off. The pollution from intensive piggeries, chicken farms and feedlots can be linked to higher levels of nitrates in waterways. This problem is particularly prevalent in Perth where each year algal blooms caused by high nitrate levels lead to fish deaths and parts of the Swan and Canning Rivers being closed. Water testing has shown that nitrate levels are particularly high immediately downstream of piggeries. Even if waste is well contained the leaching of nitrates into the soil and water is still an issue. Water consumption is also a problem with animals consuming large amounts of water, with some estimates as high as 50% of the water consumption in western countries being attributable to meat production.

In intensive conditions, instead of being raised on grasses that are not edible to humans, most animals are fed on grains, soya beans and other plant foodstuffs that humans also consume. 16 pounds of soya and grain are needed to produce around a single pound of beef raised in a feedlot. A study conducted by the University of California estimated that on a single acre of prime land 40,000 pounds of potatoes or onions, 30,000 pounds of carrots, 50,000 pounds of tomatoes or 250 pounds of beef could be produced. Approximately 80% of the grain grown in the US is fed to animals so that humans can eat them. If meat consumption is reduced, then it only follows that more grain is freed up for people to eat (remember those starving millions in developing nations?), or alternatively more land is kept in a natural state. Grain could also be grown organically or with less chemical fertilisers and pesticides, thus reducing chemical run-off into waterways and the soil, as there would be less of a demand for high yields if we didn't need to feed grain to animals.

The raising of animals in intensive conditions, their transport, the slaughtering process and the processing of meat products all have high fossil fuel usage. Be it for the artificial lighting in chicken houses, the ventilation required for piggeries, petrol for trucks or energy to run the machines in processing plants, the amount of fuel used is high, especially when compared to what is used to produce vegetables and fruit. It is estimated that even the most fuel inefficient plant products still use about a tenth of the fuel that most meat products use. It is because of this that there has been a move to have meat classified as a petroleum product in the United States by vegetarian groups in order to publicise the hidden environmental cost of meat. This, combined with methane emissions, means that meat production is a key factor in climate change and accelerated greenhouse effect.

In Australia erosion of the fragile soil is increased when compacted by hard-hoofed animals such as cows and sheep. Our soils, already naturally low in fertility have their topsoil removed by water and wind erosion caused by sheep and cattle rearing which leads to desertification. In developing nations, particularly those in South America, many farmers are being encouraged, or forced, to clear land to raise cattle for meat markets in Western countries. The soil is generally not suited to this type of agriculture so can only be used for a few years before becoming infertile. All natural ecosystems need protection and animal agriculture does not do this. Overfishing is also an issue worldwide with many fish stocks being rapidly depleted by mismanagement of fishing. This impacts on the ocean ecosystem with food webs being knocked out of balance and predators competing with humans over fish.

Around 60% of Australian land is used for agriculture and of that, 60% is used for animal agriculture. By not eating animal products this amount of land can be rehabilitated to natural wilderness, and that doesn't even consider the amount of cropping land that would be saved because grain is no longer being fed to agricultural animals. Britain could feed its current population on a pure vegetarian (vegan) diet using a fifth of the amount of agricultural land it currently uses.



So the next time you chow down on a steak (or any food for that matter), I ask you to think about where it came from and the greater impact it will have on the world that we live in. A diet with a reduced amount of animal products or one that is totally free of them is not difficult and by not supporting the environmentally harmful systems that are related to meat products you are doing your part for us to have a sustainable world.

Lisa Green

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The Challenge of Living Simply

Last year I was invited by the Australian Student Christian Movement to go on a study tour to look at Australian mining in the Philippines. Tina, Chen and Joy, or more commonly known as 'Charlie's Angels', from the SCM in the Philippines accompanied and briefed me on the tour. They were the most inspiring 20 year-olds I had ever met. Staying with them at their home really humbled me and inspired me to live my own life more simply. In their small one bedroom house they share a double bamboo bed with no mattress. There is no refrigerator or phone and all that they own fits in their small backpacks. They dedicate their lives to serving the people of the Philippines, helping farmers fight for their own land and students to resist university fee increases.

On the study tour they took me to places where Australian mining companies were trying to get permission to mine. One of these places was a village called Didipio. An Australian mining company had come to this place to explore for surface gold. During the exploration they had removed the top of the mountain and dumped the waste rock down the side. The continuation of the mine would result in the destruction of the mountain, and pollution of the surrounding rice field from the tailings dam that would cover rice paddies and a group of houses. Farmers would lose their land and

many people would experience ill health effects from living on the poisoned earth. Already one drilling hole had caused a creek to dry up, and at another drilling hole pigs that had eaten and drunk at that site died.

Yet the most shocking thing for me was that a village activist had been threatened. The activist was told by an Australian official that if he opposed the mine "something would happen to him", then the Australian had laughed and said, "No Australian would do that". Later the activist's son had gone outside to see what a dog was barking at and a man with a gun ran away from under their house. This village activist has also been threatened by the local military and bribed to support the mining project.

You can imagine how embarrassed and guilty I felt wearing a \$2,000 gold ring while people's lives and livelihoods were being sacrificed just so that I could decorate myself. Filipino villagers don't wear wedding rings.

This whole experience made me think about the way I live and consume. Do I really need to wear an expensive ring? Do I need to buy all the things that I do? If we all consume less then there would be more resources to go around and less pressure would be put on the environment. Even if everyone lived like me with my relatively simple lifestyle we

would need four planets. We've all got a lot of work to do to cut down what we consume to live simply so that others may simply live. If you'd like to work out what your ecological footprint is, how many planets we'd need if everyone were like you, visit: <http://www.mec.ca/Apps/ecoCalc/ecoCalc.jsp>

I think it is also important to think about where things we consume come from and where they will go when we've finished with them. I think that in Western countries like Australia we are very disconnected from beginning and end points. So how can we reconnect? The other day I was cleaning my house to get it ready for rent inspection and the shower was really disgusting. I tried using my glove cleaner but it still all looked pretty yellow. I was very tempted to get a high-powered cleaning product containing bleach but I just couldn't do it. An amazing thing happened in my mind, which doesn't happen very often. As I was standing in the shower holding the bleach-filled mould killer I automatically thought of my favourite beach and I just couldn't spray that



bleach. You see, that bleach would go out into the ocean and because I go snorkelling quite a bit I feel connected to the ocean and the fish and animals that live in it. I

just couldn't put that bleach into their environment. So instead I used an environmentally-friendly paste and lots of elbow grease to get all that grime off.

So how do we start to live more simply?

When I buy things from the shop I try and ask myself the following questions and if I answer 'yes' to them all, then I'll buy the item, if not, then I won't get it:

- Do I really need this?
- Is it really going to help me bring joy to my life and those around me?
- How many hours of work is it worth and, then, is it worth that?
- Has it been made responsibly?

Now I'm not always the best at this and I've got a soft spot for some things. For example, last week on holiday I saw a spinning kite and my impulsive thought was 'I've got to have one of these'. So I went into the shop and saw the spinning thing there for \$30. I asked myself - do I need this (no, not really but it'd be useful to help people to find my house and when I've got a stall at uni); is it going to bring joy to my life (yes, I've always loved spinny things and it'd help me remain childlike); how many hours of work is it worth (two) and is it worth that (yes); is it made responsibly (yes, they are handmade on site so it would help local employment). So with only one iffy response I bought it. You don't need to go cold turkey straight away but just start thinking about the things you buy.

Think about the beginning point

Sometimes that last question, 'has it been made responsibly?', is a hard one to answer. To help make things easier there are some organisations that have done the research for us. The Fairwear campaign is encouraging clothing stores and manufacturers to ensure that the fabric and clothes they sell are made without exploiting people. They are hoping to get 'no sweat shop' tags on these clothes. For a list of 'no sweat shop' stores look up: www.fairwear.org.au

When I go shopping I try to go to places where I know that people and the environment have been treated fairly. When I buy gifts for people I usually go to the Oxfam shop in Perth. I do this because I know that the people who make the items are not exploited but, even better, they are supported and employment is created in developing country villages. They have great chocolate there too and my husband and I allow ourselves a luxury tax, which means we'll always buy chocolate there even though it costs twice as much because we don't need chocolate and we don't want to eat chocolate made by children in near slavery. Planet Ark in Fremantle is where I go to get cleaning products and things like

shampoo and soap. I know that they have been made with minimal effects on the environment and that when I finish with them they won't harm the environment either.

What to do with your extra money

When you live simply you'll find that you have a lot more money, so what should we do with it? Well in the Hebrew Scriptures God's people are encouraged to tithe 10% of their income to those in need. Many Christians are pretty slack about this but Muslim people take it very seriously. In Malaysia, at a particular time of year, all Muslims tithe 10% of their income - like an extra tax. There are charities set up in the shopping centres to help people with their tithes.

Living simply also allows you to work less. This creates more employment for others, allows you to spend more time with family and friends, and gives you more time to spend in nature or to pursue hobbies, and also to volunteer for good causes.

Or living simply allows you to have more money to travel. As you can probably tell, I travel a lot and I believe that travel opens

your eyes and helps you understand people better, especially if you get off the beaten track and meet the locals.

It's really hard living simply in today's world so be prepared. Many of your friends will think you are crazy and you will be tempted by ads and shop windows. My advice is to hang out with people that admire you for living simply or who live simply too, try not to listen to too much commercial radio or TV, and cut back on window-shopping. When you do go shopping try asking yourself those four questions.

I'd like to finish with a message that my friend Tina gave me when I left the Philippines:

A true Christian sees the whole world as one. No nation, no races involved. No war. No one in the rich bracket or poor. Now let's take hands...serve the people, dare to struggle, dare to win.

Trudi Bennett

(Adaptation of an article written for students at a Perth highschool)



At the General Committee meeting in July I had the pleasure of being able to announce a surplus for the first time since taking on the role of National Treasurer. This was made possible because the January General Committee made important decisions to budget responsibly by making significant changes to the way the ASCM operates. And, as always, we are grateful for the donations from Friends that make it possible for the ASCM to function at all.

Treasurer's Report

However, the news isn't all good, and much work still needs to be done by me and other volunteers. Our first priority is to tie up some loose ends with regard to the Centenary Trust. Secondly, we are working towards becoming an incorporated association, which requires us to put a lot of work into revising our constitution. My thanks go to all those who are assisting me in these and other tasks that fall to the National Treasurer.

Rachael Palmer

School of Ecumenical Leadership Formation 2001

In July and August of 2001 I spent six weeks in Chiang Mai, Thailand, representing the Australian Student Christian Movement (ASCM) at the Regional Committee Meeting (RCM) and School of Ecumenical Leadership Formation (SELF). RCM is held every two years, and is the decision-making body for the World Student Christian Federation – Asia-Pacific Region (WSCF-AP). SELF was the first conference of its kind in this region, jointly organised by WSCF-AP, and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) Youth Desk. Its aim was to train and develop young people for leadership within the ecumenical movement.

An intense period of living with people from all over the Asia-Pacific, along with a packed timetable, has left me with many stories to share. Apart from the formal sessions on globalisation, human rights, feminism, ecology, and ecumenism, I learned about the ‘Asian Perspective’, experienced cross-cultural group dynamics, and received new insights into racism. These issues are too broad to cover in one article, so I would like to focus on one particular challenge I faced: that of my identity both as an Australian and as an individual.

I was born in England and moved to Australia when I was 13 years old. I took Australian Citizenship after two years, lost my English accent, and always supported Australia in the cricket. But was I really Australian? I have always felt a strong tie to England, at least in part because I have a lot of family there. Before going to Thailand, I took the opportunity to visit friends and family in England. Being there as an adult made me realise that I was not English.

So I arrived at SELF not only representing the Australian SCM, but also thinking of myself as Australian.

As I sat in lectures learning about Asia, colonialism, and globalisation, I began to wonder what it means to be a white Australian. The culture night was a key point in my exploration of Australian identity. The Asians knew what to wear, what to say, what to sing. It didn’t matter that the Hong Kong and Taiwanese girls bought their Chinese dresses at Chiang Mai market. They knew what dress to wear, I didn’t. A driesabone and akubra perhaps? City folk didn’t wear them though. I thought about Waltzing Matilda and the Man from Snowy River, but what did they mean to my Vietnamese, Malaysian and Indian neighbours in Melbourne? I thought about ‘mateship’ and ‘she’ll be right’, but these conjured up images of white male bushmen.

And then I came home to the Tampa crisis, and reports exposing the detention of asylum seekers – and I wondered what happened to ‘fair go’ and the ‘lucky country’. I think the question of how to manage refugees, and struggling with multiculturalism and reconciliation more broadly, challenges us to search for our identity as a nation. Until we dig into our history to determine who we are, how can we ever know where we stand on these important issues? Our politicians do not provide vision and leadership for the future, because we have failed to find an identity in our past.

Rachael Palmer

Globalisation – Searching for Alternatives

Student Empowerment



for Transformation 2002

This June, in the Philippines, about 15 people from SCMs around the Asia-Pacific region gathered for the World Student Christian Federation ‘Student Empowerment for Transformation’ (SET) conference. The topic of the conference was ‘Searching for Alternatives to Globalisation’. While the key-note speakers and bible studies were interesting, the real learning at the conference took place as we tried to communicate in 11 different languages, laughed and waved our hands when talking became too hard, shared stories about our SCMs, learnt about globalisation in each other’s countries, ate lots of mangoes and coconuts, and sang and danced the dances of 12 different countries.

How different from sitting in a clean and well-furnished lecture theatre in Australia listening to someone speak about troubles in far-away lands, to talk to a Sri Lankan SCMer about their SCM programmes between students from the war-torn Jafna region and students from the south of Sri Lanka. How moving, to talk face-to-face with a Singaporean SCMer, where the SCM has been banned from university campuses for stirring up the students. How uplifting, to hear about the exchange programme between the Japanese SCM and the Korean SCM that will explore the Japanese/Korean conflict after World War Two. How affirming, to see genuine interest and excitement in what we’re doing in Australia. How comforting, to be part of a conversation where we all mutually discovered that our struggles for existence and place were shared across the region. “It’s difficult to be SCM in Korea,” said Jo. “We have so much pressure to do well at uni, and no one has time for SCM. If students are Christians, they will be involved with evangelical groups who have

hundreds of members”. “Yes, yes, yes, of course,” said Yock. “It’s the same in Singapore”. So the SCM wasn’t supposed to be easy. But there we were, alive, and inspiring each other with our stories. And how amazing to hear how in twelve countries the mission of the SCM is to follow Christ, to serve the people, to seek justice for the oppressed, to provide space for students to explore their faith, to be a model community. To hear this from Indonesia, with its 40,000 SCMer, to the small cell movements such as our own, Aotearoa, Korea and Hong Kong.

Of the two-week conference, ten days were spent at Los Banos College, a college of the University of the Philippines in Laguna, which is near Manila. The other four days were spent on exposure trips, where we split into groups of four and travelled to different communities. My exposure group was one of two groups to make a long and hot trip north to the city of Baguio. Eight of us travelled for eight or nine hours, first passing the outskirts of Manila with its giant neon signs and towering shopping complexes that dwarfed the rows of crowded dwellings of the urban poor. Finally we began to leave the city behind, and the oppressive, humid and polluted air that those of us fortunate enough to come from less populated nations had been struggling to breathe for the past days, which gave way to a drier, more breathable heat. Once out of the city, we were travelling through agricultural land punctuated with villages and towns – some large enough to sport a glaring McDonald’s and crowds of children on their way to school, others small enough to offer only dusty roadside stalls with listless men and women squatting by them, waving their wares before the passing traffic. Most towns were big enough to at least cause a traffic

jam, as the handful of shiny cars and run-down vans and utes competed for road space with the passenger tricycles and jeepneys. At around lunch-time, we began to climb into some of the most spectacular country – the road crept perilously along the edge of mountainsides so sheer that they could not be populated, except for the occasional house or patch of terraced land that clung to the mountain.

We arrived in Baguio after dark, and to our delight found the air cool and fresh. We stayed at the Cordiella Youth Centre, which is used as an office and house for various youth movements in the region. The two men were directed upstairs, while the six women were shown to a room downstairs that had a single bed mattress, a small inflatable double bed mattress, and a piece of foam. Yock curled up on the piece of foam, Edwina, myself and Soma slept sideways on the double bed mattress, Jo slept on the single mattress and Joy found some other room to sleep in. I lay between Edwina and Soma with my arms tightly at my sides, repeating in my head ‘don’t roll over, don’t roll over, don’t...’ as I drifted off to sleep. We spent the night without mishap. In the morning, we discovered that the water supply was from a hand pump outside. Yock became very over-excited and reassessed her relationship to the water that flows so freely and wastefully from our city taps.

Leaving the Youth Centre, the two groups separated, and we walked into town and tried to hail a taxi to take us to ‘Happy Hollow’. Our guide, Nap, waved to each taxi that passed, but when the drivers heard that we wanted to go to ‘Happy Hollow’, they merely shrugged and drove on. ‘What’s going on?’ we asked. ‘The road to Happy Hollow is so bad,’ he explained, ‘that no one wants to risk their car going there.’ Eventually, we caught a jeepney that took us as far as the road went. Then we got out and walked the final kilometre into the Happy Hollow village.

Happy Hollow was named by the Americans. When they arrived, they noticed that the people were very happy. And since the village was in a hollow, it was named Happy Hollow. The people of the Cordiella region have resisted the successive waves of Spanish, Japanese and American colonisation. They’ve lived on the land for as long as anyone can remember, and the graves of several generations of their ancestors lie under their ancestral houses. They live in a wild, mountainous part of the land, and are more or less self-sufficient. They till the earth to grow rice and vegetables, and many of the houses have a small backyard piggery with three or four pigs. Chooks, dogs and cats run about chaotically, creating an idyllic farmyard atmosphere. The people within each clan have their own organisational structure, and they have a strong ethic of helping community members who are in need. But the people of Happy Hollow, the Ibolo clan, are not, in fact, happy. They have lived on the land since before land titles were created. The land is legally owned by the government and the government can do exactly what it wants with it. It can be sold to large corporations to build their factories on. Or it can be turned into luxurious resorts and golf courses for rich tourists. Alternatively, international mining companies can be given permits to tear apart the mountainside, extract the gold and then leave behind a barren wasteland.

Gerry, our guide, took us to visit a family whose house had been due for demolition the previous day. The area around the house had been surrounded by a high fence bearing the words: *Warning: Philippines Economic Zone Area. Admission only to persons bearing a pass. Trespassers will be prosecuted.* Gerry grinned, and led us through a gap in the fence. On reaching a house, we met ‘Aunty’. “Our house was due to be demolished yesterday,” she said as she calmly offered us a seat and made some coffee. “But, we protested and stopped them from going ahead. We formed a picket, and

we had a banner hanging up over there and posters and streamers everywhere. They're coming back on the fifth of July to try again".

So, who were the people at this protest? Gerry said that it had taken two months to organise, and that he had organised the Ibolo people from the community and that the Urban Poor Society had come down to help. That word, *organise*, kept coming up in conversation. Later, I asked Gerry what the work *organise* meant in the Philippines. "There are three steps," he explained. "First, we educate the people, teach them the issues they are facing and about their rights. Then, we inspire them, and finally, we mobilise them so that they can act. If a community is educated, then they know what is right to act on. If they feel they need to act, then they will take action. If they do not experience problems, then they do not act."

After we had been chatting to Aunty for a few minutes, 'Uncle' arrived, bearing boiled corn-cobs for each of us. Pointing to the imposing factory next to his house, he explained how when his great aunt had died the previous year, the government had grabbed her house to build this Norwegian craft centre. That is, the centre made Norwegian souvenirs for export to Norway. His daughter had a job at the centre, but at most, Filipinos would be offered six-month contracts. The wages were low, and there was no job security; the company could extend or terminate contracts at will. The government was trying to promote industrial and economic development as an attractive alternative to the traditional farming lives of the people.

Aunty and Uncle took us to their old ancestral home, which stood behind their present dwelling. It was the house that Uncle had grown up in. It used to be much bigger, he said, but it had caught fire during World War Two, and they had made it smaller. He pulled back some boards to show us the coffins of his parents and his

grandparents. Next to the house lay the grave of his great aunt, whose death had allowed the Norwegian craft company in.

I asked Aunty, "What would happen if the government succeeded in grabbing your land? Where would you go? Would there be any compensation?" "No," she replied. "I don't know where we would go. Of course the government should relocate us, but there is no land left in the Philippines for us to go to." I think that if they lost their land, they would go from being a small, secure family unit with a modest income and land to live off, to being beggars or small buy-and-sell merchants in the city. Their teenage daughter returned home from school, and I tried to imagine what it would be like to go to school and try to study with this dark shadow of uncertainty in your life.

We left the house and caught a jeepney into Baguio. On the way, Gerry pointed out the imposing buildings of a Texas Instruments semi-conductor factory that had already displaced many families in 1975. In Baguio, we stopped at the supermarket to buy some ingredients that Yock later cooked into delicious Chinese food for dinner. Gerry's wife was away 'organising' that night, so after dinner, Yock, Haruo, Jo, Gerry, Ilma (Gerry's one year-old daughter) and I sat around in his beautiful house, drank some whisky and chatted. Ilma was. Gerry's house was large and well-equipped, with a brand new fridge, a gas stove, running water and plenty of utensils. The bathroom had a flush toilet, and the rooms were similar to those in a modest Australian home. I compared all this to the conditions in which the other exposure groups would be staying. One group went to Payatas and would have spent the day amongst foul-smelling rubbish, and would probably now be sleeping, hungry, on hard mats, and without access to running water. But these Happy Hollow people had only what every human needs – land to grow food, space, livelihood. Sure, they had a lot more than the many urban poor in the Philippines. But that was

precisely why their lives were worth fighting for – they were living beautiful but not excessive lives. They were a living alternative to globalisation. And after only a day's work of bulldozing and demolition, the peaceful farms and gently grazing cows would be nothing more than a memory.

The next morning, we arose and joined some workers who had come to help Gerry repair a wall that had eroded. Actually, we dug the sticky clay for only around twenty minutes before our backs were aching and sweat was running down our faces. I think that our only real use was probably to provide some comic relief for the workers!

We returned to Laguna and shared our exposure experience. One group had been to Payatas, a mountain of rubbish that grows daily as the rubbish trucks arrive from the Manila area with their contributions. Thousands of people live around the mountain, seeking a living by pulling pieces of saleable plastic and metal from the rubble. The people, especially the children, suffer from serious health problems as a result of the toxic fumes associated with the dump. The other Baguio group had been to a vegetable farm, where the farmers were growing Chinese vegetables to sell overseas. The vegetables were not ones that they were accustomed to eating, so they have become reliant on fast food. Although they toiled to grow green vegetables, they were malnourished! The last group went to a mining site outside of metropolitan Manila. The people there had been displaced from their land and were living in poverty under the excessive control of the mine owners.

Returning to Melbourne hasn't been easy. On the last day of SET we did 'action planning'. It was similar to every other 'action planning' that I've been to, and our outcome closely resembled the 'action plan' that we made at the end of the 2002 ASCM conference. And it seemed to me, with all the pain and poverty that I had seen rushing around my head, that our action plan was

quite useless. Trivial, in fact. Actions designed only to purge our own guilt and to fool us into thinking that we are powerful enough to change the world. Just living seemed to insult the earth and humanity, as I puffed out carbon dioxide, belched out toxic fumes, filled up landfill sites, abused clothing workers and cut down ancient rainforest trees. I sullenly continued to put out the recycling, switch off lights, take my calico bags to the supermarket and avoid black-listed brands, more out of habit than any conviction that I was making any difference to anyone or anything. If I'd suggested this point of view to a Filipino SCMer, they would have told me that of course we can make a difference. That to take action, we just need to organise the people – educate, inspire and mobilise. And over and over again, I've been asking myself – how does 'organising' work in Australia?

I think I'm starting to 'recover'. A friend suggested that 'we don't have to know the complete solution in order to start implementing it'¹. We don't know whether our scattered, tiny pieces of activism will eventually tie together into a movement for change, or whether they will remain as undeveloped fragments of idealism. But if we're not fighting for what we believe in, what are we living for?

Claire Vincent

¹ Thanks, Kate Barnard.



So this was it - mid-afternoon on a cool winter's day, and I was standing outside Sydney airport watching a plane take off, carrying one of my housemates back home to Perth. I felt surprisingly calm considering I was about to embark on an ambitious pilgrimage, one in which I was to survive for thirty days on thirty dollars (about twenty-two dollars as it turned out) and make my way to Adelaide. I was not to rely on friends and all I had with me were the clothes on my back and a small backpack containing some toiletries, underwear, an umbrella and a journal.

I had gleaned the idea from some American Jesuits I had read about, who did similar pilgrimages as part of their training. The intention is to leave behind the comfortable, little existence we build for ourselves, and to survive, learn, beg, improvise, trust, stay in shelters, ask for hospitality and meet God in new ways. It's based loosely on the Gospel accounts of the sending out of the disciples, in which they were instructed to take no baggage, stay wherever they were put up, and eat what they were given.

Disappointed by the current, soft state of much of institutional religious life, I was inspired by the pilgrimage concept and decided to have a go at it myself. Also, given that I am trying to write a big-picture book about humanity and where we're headed, I figured that an experience like this would give me a good perspective from which to write (as opposed to just sitting at my computer all year). As it turned out I already had a flight to Sydney for Matt and

Sophia's wedding [Ed. See next article], followed by a four-day road-trip with some Perth friends who were also making the journey to attend the wedding. I removed the Sydney-Adelaide leg of my return flight, delayed the Adelaide-Perth leg by 30 days, and began the pilgrimage after seeing my friends off at the airport.

Over the next 30 days I would stay at churches, shelters, a mosque, a 24-hour McDonald's and under a tree one night. I ate mainly at soup kitchens or wherever I was staying. I made my way from Sydney to Adelaide by getting lifts with truckies. I had two periods of very little sleep and one of very little food, but for the most part I was taken care of pretty well and I met some amazing people along the way. What follows is a somewhat random collection of the more significant moments and reflections that took place during the month.

I had a little send-off with family and friends before I left Perth, and it felt good to have a supportive group back home keeping me in their thoughts and prayers. My housemates were keeping a prayer book in which people would write prayers for me while I was away. My immediate family was quite supportive and not overly worried - I guess they were used to me doing crazy things from time to time!

My housemates had also generously bought me a pair of quality walking boots as a parting gift. However, they were subsequently stolen during the road-trip, leaving me with the second-hand dress shoes I had worn to the wedding (I guess I wasn't meant to have flash footwear for what I was attempting!). I got sore ankles towards the end, but the dress shoes did the job and kept my feet drier than my sneakers would have.

I had deliberately refrained from planning ahead before the pilgrimage, so that I would be forced to live and make decisions in the moment. Yet once I had become acquainted

with the feeling of uncertainty regarding where I would eat or sleep, I actually found it quite enjoyable - I was now free to wander wherever I felt led, I didn't have to worry about paying the bills or feeding the chooks - I could literally close my eyes, spin around, and head in whatever direction I landed! Some people who knew my situation accused me of bludging, but I figured that, since this was only for a short period, the learning I received would justify whatever inconvenience I caused (besides, people could - and sometimes did - refuse my requests).

As much as I tried to avoid setting goals, I did try to balance two approaches throughout the month. Firstly, I wanted to get a taste of life on the streets, to see what life is like for a homeless person. Yet, in striving to be true to the Gospel accounts, I also wanted to meet people where they were at and I was therefore reluctant to refuse hospitality that was offered to me. At times I was unsure as to how much I should tell people about what I was doing; I know some people got inspiration from the story so it felt right to share it in certain circles, yet in my desire to be treated as a regular homeless guy it often felt right to just keep it to myself. On one level I knew that, no matter what I did, I would not get a complete experience of homelessness, since my education and connections meant I always had the option of bailing out if things got too rough. Even though I didn't have to resort to this, the fact that it was there as an option made my situation feel less desperate than it might be for others. Also, I generally feel reasonably safe walking the streets at night, partly due to my 23 year-old, six-foot-four frame. I was conscious that a pilgrimage such as this would probably carry a considerably higher level of risk for a woman - yet another way in which I'm advantaged by my gender.

It quickly became obvious that whatever sense of entitlement I might normally have no longer applied. One night at a church

guest-house I was kept from going to sleep for an hour or so by the sound of table tennis down the hall. However, I realised that I had no grounds for complaint, for a comfortable bed indoors was now a privilege, not a right, and if I didn't like it I could always try my luck on the street.

I was surprised at how much pride I walk around with each day. For example, even though food-hall leftovers are a fairly safe bet for a meal, I always found it quite embarrassing to reach for the half-eaten plate if other people were around. I remembered what I used to think of people I'd seen doing the same thing, and my judgements of them were now coming back to haunt me!

It felt a bit weird to be on the other side of a soup kitchen - receiving help instead of giving it - but it didn't take me long to feel quite at home amongst the vast assortment of broken men at the shelters. There's a pervading sense of humility and mutual respect, almost as if they all know they aren't any better than anyone else there. I kept to myself at first, but gradually became quite relaxed in the awareness that I no longer had to worry about many of the little charades we maintain in proper society, such as our appearance. I was also surprised by the bizarre form of humour and lightness that hovered among the sorrow and smell.

When staying at a Jesuit church in King's Cross, I got to know some of the homeless folk who slept on the church verandah, and I was struck by the strong sense of community they had. One of the mentally-ill guys crapped his pants one night, and a couple of the others stripped him off, hosed him down, wrapped him in a blanket and took him to an op-shop to get him some new pants; I doubt I would have been that generous!

The cold and wet weather often made things difficult by restricting opportunities to rest outdoors and hampering walking from place

to place. Nonetheless, it felt right that I was attempting this when I would get a taste of street life at its most trying (of course, winter in Australia is thankfully not as harsh as winter in many other parts of the world).

St Mary's Cathedral basically became my spiritual home base during my stay in inner Sydney. This was most surprising because I've never felt particularly comfortable about big, expensive church buildings, and I've been even less comfortable with some of the statements of the resident honcho George Pell (I should note that I am friends with George's housemate, Tony Dougherty, who is the Dean of St Mary's and an all-round top bloke). Nonetheless, I would come to St Mary's to pray several times during my two weeks in inner Sydney, and the old building somehow helped me feel connected to a wider community stretching around the globe and going back two thousand years (having said this, I must admit that mass at the nearby homeless shelter felt a lot more real than mass at the Cathedral).

Throughout the pilgrimage, I had a strong sense of being looked after. When I decided to try my luck at a mosque I had no idea of what I should do or say (I had never been to a mosque before, yet alone asked for hospitality from one). I took off my shoes and was about to enter when a lovely young man I had met earlier that day came in. We had both been volunteering at a church-run soup-kitchen a couple of suburbs away that morning, and I had already told him my situation. I had no idea he was a Muslim, and he had no idea that I was heading to his local mosque. He laughed at the odds of this happening, took me under his wing and made me feel at home! After a night at the mosque, I was passed around to various Muslims who looked after me. One poor man, who had known me for five minutes, took me home, cooked me a meal, then gave me \$50 and a key to his house, telling me to stay as long as I wanted! I tried to give him the money back but he got upset, saying he

would not receive his heavenly blessing if I did not accept his gift. It was really good getting to know the Muslim guys, but I missed the interaction with women, and I think some of the guys were a bit disappointed that I hadn't converted by the time I left!

When I asked for hospitality at a Franciscan church, they were somewhat skeptical of my story, as they had recently been ripped off by a con-artist. They eventually decided I could stay one night but no more. However, it just so happened that the next morning their small church was host to the official launch of Catholic Earthcare Australia, with guests from around the country attending. The visitors included three prominent Western Australian church representatives who I am friends with, each of whom vouched for the legitimacy of my pilgrimage, convincing the Franciscans to let me stay as long as I needed! To top it off, that very morning one of my housemates had written in the prayer journal asking that I would meet a familiar face.

My most difficult patch was probably when I was trying to arrange my first truck ride. I was in the outer Sydney suburbs, a long way from the inner city soup-kitchens, and I had no money and hadn't eaten anything substantial for over a day. Knock-backs from nearby churches forced me to sleep under a tree. The Salvos helped me out with a food voucher late the next day, and the truck ride worked out in the end, but I was getting quite desperate for a while. As it turned out, one of my housemates had written recently in the prayer journal asking that I would be sent unsupportive people, and that it would be difficult, so that I might learn from the struggle and not merely be pampered everywhere I went. When I returned home and noticed how many of their prayers had eventuated, I started to wonder whether my housemates might have a direct line to God!

In Adelaide I was introduced to a man who had done a similar pilgrimage but on a much larger scale. Likewise, I also read about an amazing lay brother in Chicago who has given away everything to live and work with the gangs in the ghettos, trying to be a loving and non-judgemental presence. Such accounts helped me put my pilgrimage into perspective; at least I didn't have to worry about bullets whizzing past me on the streets!

Upon returning to Perth, I was taken aback by the awestruck way in which some people now treated me (as though they wanted to canonise me) - I felt like saying, 'It's just me!' I remembered that whenever people began putting Saint Francis on too much of a pedestal he would walk through town in his underwear and tell dirty jokes, just to shake their overly pious image of him!

As expected, I returned home to find I had very few shifts at my seasonal workplace, and that I no longer had a Student Allowance to supplement my income. Consequently, I had returned home to find another kind of poverty waiting for me, and I resorted to borrowing money and relying on my housemates' generosity for a while as I looked for work. I actually found this type of poverty harder, because no one admires you for needing to borrow money! My housemates said it was part two of the same experience, giving me another angle on poverty - God bless 'em!

An American friend emailed me a few days after I had returned home to say that he'd had a young man knock on his door, explain that he was on a spiritual pilgrimage and ask for hospitality. Imagining me at his door, my friend said he couldn't possibly refuse!

The month was a time of seeing the world

from a rather different perspective than I am used to, and it left me feeling very grateful for all that I have been given in my life. So many of the things I used to worry about now seem very insignificant - I have a roof over my head, food on the table, and the support of friends and family. The other personal stuff is just gravy. I also came away realising that issues of social justice are not as black and white as I had once thought - I now feel that trying to bring love to a situation should be the primary aim of our action, and while the whole business of social outcomes is an important part of bringing love, it is not sufficient in itself.

The month was also a lesson in humility and trust - I was in the belly of the whale for 30 days, and there was little I could do to guarantee my safety. Nonetheless, I have been spit up on the shore, safe and sound, and all the better for the experience. I am thus more confident to go forth with my life in the knowledge that I am being looked after in ways that I don't always understand. Let me finish with a prayer I wrote a few days before I left Perth, which gave me comfort and reassurance whenever I began to feel worried:

Guide me, God
May your will be done
I am but a single person
Without you I am nothing
Alone I am scared, but I trust in your
guidance
Be with me, God; walk with me
Lead me on the path, and I will follow you
anywhere
In you I trust, in you I live
In you I am safe and at peace with all things

Mark Baumgarten

The Capitalist Fairyland of the Betrothed

Part 2: Wedding and Aftermath

The party lights have been taken down, the make-up washed off my face, and I awaken as if after a long sleep to find that there is a white gold ring on my finger, and apparently I'm married. How did this happen? We've been married for over two months now and the sight of my hand with a wedding ring on it still startles me sometimes.

"Was it everything you'd dreamed of?"

I'm pleased to say that it wasn't everything I'd dreamed of, because if it had been it would have been a Barbie-doll, female-focused, tizzy fashion show with more cameras than people. (Not all dreams about weddings are pleasant. In most of my pre-wedding dreams I was naked, or Matt didn't show up, or there was no food. The no-food-at-the-reception nightmare was the worst). One thing that's surprised me about talking to people after the wedding is how eager they are to hear about the stuff-ups. And I'm the same with other people's weddings. What is wrong with us all?

Home and away game

Our families and friends for the most part live 4,000km apart. We HAD to have a home and away game: it was the only way to resolve the issue without losing one of our two major corporate sponsors (i.e. Barry and Kerry Inc. and Heather and Byron Pty Ltd). And we aren't the first ASCM couple to have two wedding ceremonies (aka Natalie and Shawn). Matt agonised about where the first event should be held. Should it be Perth, because that's where we live and it would be easier to organise? Should it be Over East where a lot of our friends live? But to me this issue was never up for discussion. The first wedding (the real one, the legal one, the one with the rings and the official change in marital status, the one where I would pay a make-up artist to make me look good) would be in Sydney, because I'M THE BRIDE AND IT'S MY SPECIAL

DAY AND WE WILL BLOODY WELL GET MARRIED NEAR MY FAMILY AND I'VE MOVED ALL THAT WAY ACROSS THE BLOODY COUNTRY CHASING YOU AND THE LEAST YOU CAN DO IS GIVE ME A CHANCE TO SHOW OXFORD STREET I CAN LOOK GOOD IF I REALLY TRY AND GOD HELP ME IF YOU TRY TO TELL ME OTHERWISE AND IF YOU WANT TO GET MARRIED IN PERTH THEN FEEL FREE BUT I WON'T BE BLOODY SHOWING UP. Simple. Conflict resolution is easy if everyone really listens to each other. That's what they taught us at our marriage preparation course and by golly it works if you shout a lot.

Getting the dress

Wedding dress shopping, if conducted at reputable wedding shops in metro areas, is a scary business. These shops look pretty from the outside, but it's another world past those doors, a world where white looks good on everyone, where prices don't matter because Daddy is paying, and where looking like a cupie-doll is a good thing. It's the childhood dress-up box taken to a hideous, dangerous, expensive extreme. There should be a law against having that much tulle in one place.

The first time I went to one of those shops I took my friend Kathy, and she had to debrief me for a full two days afterwards. Imagine the scene: It is one of Perth's busiest bridal shops on a Saturday morning. We walk in and are assailed by the smell of dry-cleaning, the sound of Vivaldi and the dazzling white of Perth's finest brides-to-be strolling about in uncomfortable, ill-fitted dresses, stumbling up onto little podiums, with their mothers, aunties and bridesmaids cooing and stoically passing each other tissues, while The Special Girl holds in her tummy, tilts her head to the side and looks unsure and annoyed. We are also assailed by

Gloria, a staff member: “Helloooooooo! I’ll be asseesting you this morning. And who’s the bride? OOOOOOOOOooooo you’re getting married! How exciting!!” (How many times in a working day does this woman have someone she doesn’t know from Eve telling her they are getting married? How does she manage to pretend to be excited about each and every one? Is there a special drug for that?) “You just wander around and tell me what you like,” Gloria says, in a strong Filipino accent. I’m startled and Kathy is giggling, but we need to get on and do this, so I select what I think are a few basic dress shapes to have a look at. I also select a ridiculous fairy wedding dress. It’s white and pink, with a haUGE hooped skirt. Gloria coos, smiles, and is generally sycophantic, and I’m hustled into a fitting-room, a corset, the petticoat, the dress, the shoes, and then out to Kathy. “Awwwww, you look beauuuuutiful!” says Kathy, in a very un-Kathy-like way. Then I’m up on a podium, holding plastic flowers and Gloria is coming at me armed with a very serious veil.

“No thanks, no veil,” I say. Gloria looks more disorientated than insulted. “What you mean no veil? Why no veil?” There wouldn’t be many answers that would satisfy Gloria, so I just say: “I don’t think it would suit me.” Wrong answer. Quick as a flash she scales the podium and rivets the veil to my head. “There,” she says, “very simple, but beauuuuutiful!”, as if the two properties are rarely found together. I start pulling it away from my face. I feel trapped, suffocated, like with every second I am selling out the suffragettes. And before I know it I have said this out loud. “Is OK,” says Gloria, “you don’t like it huh?” She removes the veil, just before I start having a full-on panic attack. But the damage is done: I am spooked. We politely withdraw from the world of bridal, and drown ourselves in about eight coffees. “Don’t make me go back there,” I plead of Kathy. There must be a better way.

There was a much better way, and her name was Anne. Her opening banter on the phone was: “I don’t need your business. I make wedding dresses because I love doing it. I won’t make your dress for you unless you are willing to let me do what I need to do to make you your perfect gown. And I’m not cheap.” Anne was a no-nonsense woman, and I would have trusted her with my life. On the last fitting she held onto my upper arm, fixed me with a very firm look and said: “Now look. This dress is NOT a tracksuit. If you wear this dress you have to be ELEGANT! Remember you ARE elegant in this dress.” Sorry Anne. The photographer made me do it. I don’t even usually play cricket.

Tina Turner says: “No photos please”

Two weddings means two hen’s nights. I had one in Perth and another in Sydney a week later. I won’t say too much about either of these events. While there are no court cases pending, you never know.

Both events had the same theme: ‘Sophia’s Rockstar Review’, dressed as your favourite rock idol, in a private karaoke room to give vent to the rockstar within with the aid of good friends and some alcohol. I was Tina Turner. I wasn’t just dressed like Tina Turner, I actually became Tina Turner. Some of the other participants had a similar experience. It was a thrill to have Suzi Quatro, Sheena Easton, Madonna (x3), Stevie Nicks, Chrissie Amphlet and many other inspirational figures join me, and I am a better person for knowing them. On both occasions, women took me aside during the pre-karaoke dinner and said: “Now don’t you worry about me. I’m not into Karaoke, and I’m not going to get up and sing, but I’ll have a good time just watching the rest of you.” But these shy protesting women were the ones who would not be restrained when ‘Like a Virgin’ came on, and who would kick others in the head as they rolled around on the floor or on the coffee table. There were a few wrestling incidents for microphones. (If they’d just given me the

mike at the start of each Michael Jackson song, no one would have got hurt. But no, they wanted me to share. See the 'My Special Day' rant above: "It's my bloody hen's night and I'm telling you I WON'T stop till I get enough!")

Enough said. If anyone has photos I am willing to pay big money for the negatives. I am willing to pay bigger money than Matt.

A new family tradition

About two months before the wedding, my Mum says to me on the phone: "I want to throw you a Bridal Shower". "No thanks, Mum," I say. "Lovely thought, but not necessary. Sadly, I couldn't get all that Tupperware back to Perth." (thinking retch retch, a bridal shower? As if! Why would I do that?) Then Mum pulled out the big guns: "But I don't get to do ANYTHING! You're all the way over there and you aren't letting me HELP!" There was NO come-back to that, not that a come-back would have mattered. Mum admitted the bridal shower was already planned anyway. All I had to do was turn up, and Mum and her friends would do the rest.

So four days before the wedding, there I was in Harden in my parent's backyard, greeting a stream of Mum's friends, forcing a champagne into their hand while invariably taking a beige and brown crock-pot out of their other hand. Dad had been evicted for the day. He had offered to be our stripper, but when we declined he slunk away to the safety of The Club. A few of my friends had driven down from Canberra to keep me company and escort me out of the building if I thought I was going to hurt someone.

Everything seemed to be going fine, but something told me all was not well. Then Mum spirited me away from the group and stuck on my head The Headpiece from Hell. This is the decorative apparatus that Mum wore to her own wedding in 1968. It's a bonnet with a daisy motif. It's like a quarter of a sphere, very solid, that sits right on top

of the head. It's got plastic daisies stuck all over it, with a two-layered veil hanging down the back. And it's got two bits of nylon rope stuff to tie it on under the chin, and each bit of rope has a daisy on the end. I've hated and mocked The Headpiece from Hell all my life. Mum wore such a simple flattering dress to her wedding, and then she stuck that THING on her HEAD. Why? (I suspect my daughter will ask the same about me one day.)

I was forced out in front of her friends, and they made me practice walking and singing. They gave me some lovely gifts (no Tupperware but some good practical stuff). Mum also gave me a framed print of a three year-old girl washing dishes, with the caption 'The Good Little Housewife'. She thought it was hilarious, as did all the other married women. "That's just so you know what you're getting yourself in for," they said, and cacked themselves. The wine kept flowing, and the celebrity heads started (it took me ages to guess that I was the Pope). My aunts bickered about family weddings from the past: "Why didn't you let ME be your bridesmaid? I'm older than her!"; "I lent you my veil and you lost it". I was showered in bridal advice (such as: "Don't worry about Matthew. The groom is just the bride's handbag on the day.") The last guest tottered out the door carrying the last of the champagne about five hours after kick-off. Mum and I were both exhausted.

The night before

The day before the wedding not only did I have lists of things to do, I actually had a list of lists. All went well except I lost my voice. By 10pm I couldn't even rasp at people but I still kept bossing Matt around. Losing my voice was not on any of my lists of things to do. I spent the night before and the day of the wedding writing little notes and tapping my pen to get people's attention, making very determined and angry faces if people wouldn't pay attention to me. It was like Pictionary, except it wasn't fun.

Looking pretty

I paid big money to look pretty. Our wedding was due to start at 4pm, and Mum and I were required at the beauty salon at 10.30am. From 10.30am to 1am is a long time to be wearing make-up and big hair. We had two staff attending to us, and these lovely men seemed eager to get me drunk. I refused all alcohol, so they decided that Mum needed to drink my share as well. So there we were, me in enormous drain-pipe curlers and far too much blush, and Mum with her head stuck in a dryer, drunk at 11am on a Sunday, when Matt walked past the salon window, escorted by the Best Man. I shielded my eyes and told the beauty artists my wedding luck was in peril. They downed tools and ran screeching like a pair of schoolgirls out onto the street: "Is he the big one or the scruffy one? His legs are so BIG! Why is he wearing shorts in June?" "Ooooooooo, don't you look, don't you look," they barked. "Shouldn't he BE somewhere if he's getting married today? Who's doing HIS hair? Who's that other one? He's not going to dress like that at the wedding, is he?" It took me 20 minutes to settle them back down.

Get me to the church on time

My parents and I argued about getting to the church. I didn't want to rent a car. Waste of money, not necessary. I wanted to walk. But it was too far (a good 20 minutes up Oxford Street), and too likely that I would look a fright when I got there. Two days before the wedding I acquiesced to Mum's fretting, and asked my cousin Luke to drive us. But he was already organised in a Wooldridge minibus from the Northern Beaches.

I don't know why everyone doesn't get a taxi to their wedding. It's a lot easier. When we were ready, we just went down to the street and whistled. While I sat in the front seat, clutching my Bible, Mum and Dad were arguing about how to get in the back seat without damaging my flowers. The driver bent his head around his security

shield and said: "You are going for prayers?" When I told him we were driving to my wedding he was more excited than I was. "ALL MY LIFE I've wanted to drive a bride," he said, grinning maniacally. "You are No. 1 Bride for me!" As this was exactly the sort of compliment I needed to settle my nerves, I chose to ignore the translation issue. He politely drove us around one block for 15 minutes, and was happy to pose for photos with me when I got out. He refused to accept payment. He was a very good omen. I'm sure I wouldn't have felt so calm if I'd got a limo.

The wedding

Well, it was wonderful. It was just stunning. I don't mean me or him; I mean how so many magnificent people were there to support us. My Nana gave part of the sermon. Our families and friends asked us our vows. Everyone was seated in a circle so there was no stage or audience. Both our families thought the ceremony we'd written was beautiful, despite the lack of a Catholic priest. It was gratifying to be told by some married guests that they thought the vows we had written were realistic, genuine and sincere. My friends and family who have no tolerance for organised religion weren't appalled by the content either. The music was wonderful: Julia Pitman led a group of our good friends as a makeshift choir, and everyone in the church sang. It was beautiful, and I still feel stunned when I remember it.

"How's married life?"

The marriage, the thing that all this fuss has been about, is going very well, and thanks for asking. Marriage rocks. Loving it. Loving the bloke. Yes, I do think it's different to living together, but I can't yet put into words what is different. I feel like God has called my bluff, and all the cultural baggage attached to weddings and marriage can no longer be an excuse for why I haven't started becoming the person I want to be.

Hints for brides-to-be

Use alcohol as a coping strategy throughout the wedding preparation period.

Don't look for bridal shoes. They're usually ugly and double the normal price. Instead, get a cheap vinyl shoe that's comfortable and practical, and wear them in a bit. Then go to your local key-and-shoe shop and get them spray-painted white.

Don't trust a bridesmaid after 10pm. When the dancing was underway, I took my hat off. I asked some of the bridesmaids: "Do I have hat hair? Do I look really bad without the hat?" "No," they all said. "You look fine!" But they lied like pigs in mud.

It's all trivial, in a way. As long as the right bloke shows up and gives an affirmative answer to the relevant questions, the rest is just icing. But enjoy the icing!

Sophia Wooldridge

(Yes, that's still Wooldridge. Lamont is a lovely name but it's not my name.)



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Australian Student Christian Movement
PO Box 4386
University of Melbourne
PARKVILLE VIC 3052