

March 10, 2018
(February Letter)

Dear Samantha,

Looks like I missed getting this out to you before the end of February, but I guess you won't complain too much since I haven't got your February letter either. I expect you are as busy as I am.

How is your job going at the church? I was thinking how perfect it is for your recreation administration training. You certainly made a good choice of program! It will be fun to see what opportunities emerge in the future. One of the exciting things about such skills is that they may be used in so many different contexts.

This was certainly my experience with group work and conference organizing. Like you, I got my first experiences in the church – participating, and then helping to organize meetings. I remember some of my earliest experiences in Kairos at Marpole United Church. There was a small group of young people (high school) there that met weekly (I think). We organized a variety of activities and I eventually was elected to lead the group. This meant coming up with things to do, getting the necessary materials together, and “animating” the activities. You will be familiar with this.

When I went to UBC, I became involved with the SCM (Student Christian Movement) in some of their workshops and seminars. With time, I helped out with the organization of various events – not just SCM-focused ones, but also various social action events like anti-war demonstrations. This meant I learnt a whole new set of skills like silk-screening, pamphlet production, and writing reports (in those days there were no photocopy machines or internet). In my later undergraduate years I was elected President and got to go to various conferences and meetings both within and outside the SCM. That was why I hitch-hiked one year to Toronto and for a couple of years went to Bala (north of Toronto) for the annual SCM national conference.

At UBC, we also organized retreats and workshops – most often in the fall. Some of these were open to SCM participants only, but there were a number of them that we organized for anyone on campus. I remember a series in which I was very involved as an organizer that focused on Mythology. We would usually try to find a Canadian expert in whatever topic was being considered, so we attempted to get Marshall McLuhan to come as a speaker. He was not available at the time, but suggested a colleague in Montréal which I met when I was there for a conference. We organized the conference at Rosario Beach in Washington State.

One other memorable conference was the national SCM Christmas Conference of 1965. That was the year that it was held at UBC so we were responsible for organizing it on behalf of the national organization. It was also memorable because that was the time that Fran and I started “going out” or whatever it is called these days.

When I became a graduate student, I continued my activities in conferences – only this time it was mostly with the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association (CSAA). They had annual conferences which lasted a few days, included many speakers, and a few hundred people. It was a great way for us to travel and see places since they were held in various cities across the country – plus funds were provided to students who were presenting papers. That's how we ended up in St. John's, NL with Daegan when she was about 18 months old. I think I might have told you a bit about that trip.

Both Fran and I became involved in the administration of the CSAA – as volunteers, then later as Secretary-Treasurer, and (me as) President. Each year's event added to our experiences in both organizing events, conducting meetings, and leading a large organization. It also meant that we both became part of a large network of people that opened up new opportunities along the way. Fran became known as a great organizer.

As my career developed, I was involved in a large network of people working on research related to rural issues and once again found myself busy organizing conferences, workshops, and other meetings. This time it was with the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF). I was involved with the organization of most of their annual conferences (from about 1989) but one of the most memorable was a conference in Wolfville, NS for which I was responsible. It was a challenge since I was in Montréal but all the selection of venues, organization of activities, and local connections had to be done in NS. I got a few trips out of that experience.

The wonderful thing about the CRRF conferences is that they were always held in rural places. This meant that I got to go to small and remote places from one end of the country to the other. For example, we had conferences in Twillingate, NL, Coaticook, QC, Goderich, ON, Brandon, MB, Muenster, SK, Grande Prairie, AB, Quesnel, BC, and Inuvik, NT just to name a few.

The other great thing about the conferences was that we always worked with the local people (they often organized the program) and included a local tour where they would take us to places in their region which were interesting from a research and policy point of view. It meant that all the conference participants climbed on buses and met with local people in their own environment so we could find out from them what the issues were that they faced and compare notes with people from across the country and around the world who were participating in the conference. Over the 30 or so years of these events we have learned a great deal by this type of activity.

When we became successful getting various grants for our activities (e.g. The New Rural Economy Project from 1997 to 2011 and the Rural Policy Learning Commons from 2014 to 2021) we were able to improve the ability of people to attend. This included more international participants (including from two rural places in Japan) but also more rural people from one region of the country could participate in activities located in another. This was very good, because they got to see how many of the issues that they face are shared by others – and to see how others deal with the challenges in new and innovative ways.

I have been particularly pleased to see how many of these acquaintances have grown to more long-term friendships. One of the most impressive events was when the tsunami in Japan damaged a nuclear power plant in Fukushima. This affected one of the towns with which we had conducted research (Itatate) – and to which some of our Canadian small town people had visited as a result of our support. I was immediately contacted by many of the rural people from Canada asking if they could help. Many of them offered their homes in case some of the people wished to send their children there until the danger passed.

It looks like the skills that Fran and I have picked up for organizing will continue to be used. Fran has been contacted by the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality to see if she will help them with their international conference in Montréal this November. They will get some highly qualified help from her!

Fran and I are off to Mexico tomorrow for 2 weeks. We will then stop in to see a friend from graduate school in Pasadena on our way back to Montréal. It will be nice to warm up a bit from the rather cold winter.

Love,