

# FOCUS NATIONAL STUDENT CONFERENCE 2016 “Engaging the University”

April 9th-11th  
The Retreat Centre, Pandatharippu,  
Jaffna.



The FOCUS National Student Conference 2016 was held from 9th-11th April at The Retreat Centre, Pandatharippu, Jaffna. Over seventy-five students from universities and tertiary institutions in all parts of the country participated in this event. For many students though, the camp ‘began’ with the journey to Jaffna on the night of the 8th – some travelling from Batticaloa and the East, others taking buses from Colombo and Peradeniya, and still others joining in along the way. Finally, by around 8 am on the 9th, everyone was at the campsite and ready to begin!

The theme for the camp this year was “Engaging the University”. That is, being a disciple in relation to all aspects of university life – whether in hostels or lecture halls, canteens or common rooms, with lecturers, students, service staff and the administration – everywhere and in relation to everything! Our call is to minister to the university as a whole, and it was to explore this big vision that we gathered together as university students from around the island.

Some of the student leaders composed a song that expressed their struggles, their joys and their motivation as they engage in God’s mission in the university:

*We thank you Lord for placing us here  
Though this place seems so evil, we know you are here  
We boast in the cross and the victory of your reign  
What we see is not eternal,  
The Lord will have the final word  
So we thank you Lord for placing us here.*



The Retreat Centre at Pandatharippu. Run by Catholic sisters, this scenic place is a 45 minute bus journey from Jaffna town.



# The Sessions



## 1. The God who Calls Us

The God who created the universe is the same God who calls us to mission in the university. God himself has gone before us and is present and active within the university. He calls us to seek, find and partner with Him in the university.

*"I learned many things through camp. In particular God gave me a deep desire to share the gospel with others. This is now my aim..."*  
- **A.Kasthury, Eastern University**



## 2. Christ the Supreme Saviour

Humanity is engaged in pursuing a secular ('city') and a religious ('tower') dream as described in Genesis 11. These dreams are primarily motivated by our need to secure our own security and honour. Jesus gave up His own honour and security in order that we would be made secure and have significance in Him.



*"I have a great desire to serve God... through this camp I learned of how I may serve him in university life!"*  
- **A. Jesu Paul, University of Jaffna**

*"I have tried to share Lord's word many times with my friends but I failed most of the time. But now, I am determined to try a different approach, and I hope the Lord will bless me and all of us to make it a success."*  
- **Helani Alahakoon, University of Peradeniya**



## 4. Incarnation and Suffering

The Incarnation and Suffering of Jesus as described in Philippians 2:1-11 shows us the mind of Christ as he voluntarily limited himself, left his security and comfort and faced humiliation for the sake of the salvation of the world. Jesus' approach to mission must shape the way in which we engage the university as Christ-followers.



*"I have learned so many new things about God and I have also come to meet a lot of new people whom I will proudly call my friends. I have learned that there are various ways to serve the Lord and also God has various ways to shower his love upon us."*  
- **Kamalene Mills, ICBT.**



*"During this camp I've especially learned that I should place my security in God and not build a city or a tower for my personal glory/ interests. I've also been challenged to build bridges between my uni life and my faith, and to have a deep concern for others even perhaps sacrificing my personal interests."*  
- **Sindhu Ratnarajan, University of Colombo**

## 3. The University and Our Faith

The university is a place where we can discover the glory of God and develop the talents and abilities we need to be good stewards. The challenge is to build bridges between the Word of God and the World of God. This requires us to be deeply involved in the life of the university (whether in student unions or in extra-curricular activities, in sports or in academic work) and also to grow deeply in our faith (walking with God and reflecting on Scripture and its implications for all of university life).



*"This camp enabled me to reflect and change the way I look at what I learn in uni in the way that God wants me to rather than how I want to."*  
- **Dileepa Fernando, University of Moratuwa**



## 5. Communicating the Gospel

What sort of preparation would we have to make if we were appointed ambassadors of Sri Lanka? How would we represent Sri Lanka to other countries? Is this a good way for us to start thinking about how we can represent and witness to Jesus and the Kingdom of God in our university life?



**LEARNING THROUGH LIVING**



**FUN AND GAMES**



**DISCUSSION TIMES**

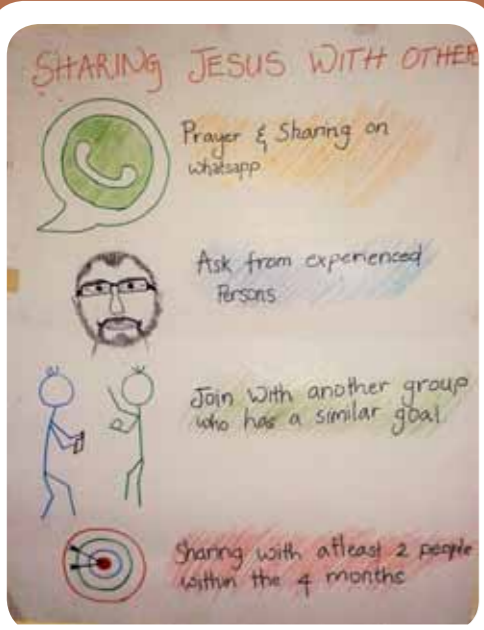


**TIMES OF WORSHIP**



**JAFFNA FORT AND RIO ICE CREAM!**





**Sharing Jesus with others**

- There is a general interest among university students to know what each religion teaches.
- Many non-Christian students seek Christians for prayer and support regularly.
- Some have questions about the theology and the practice of the Christian faith.
- We need to develop ways to reach out to students who are not active 'seekers'.

**Mission to the University**

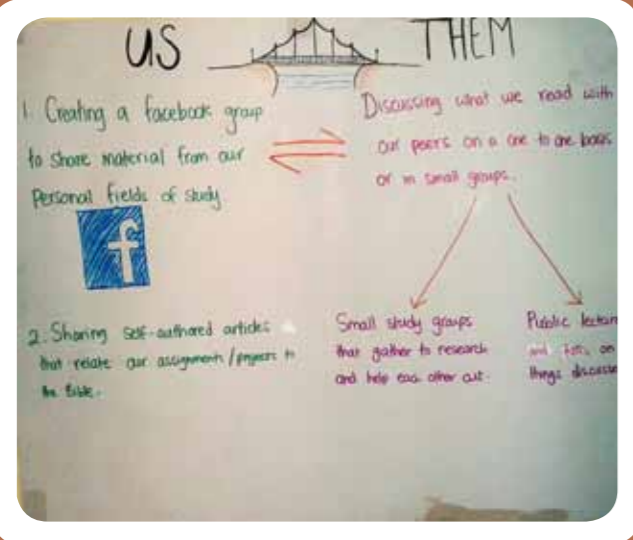
Throughout the conference, students reflected on six aspects of our overall call to mission to the university.

Afterwards, students decided which area they wanted to be particularly involved in, in the coming year.



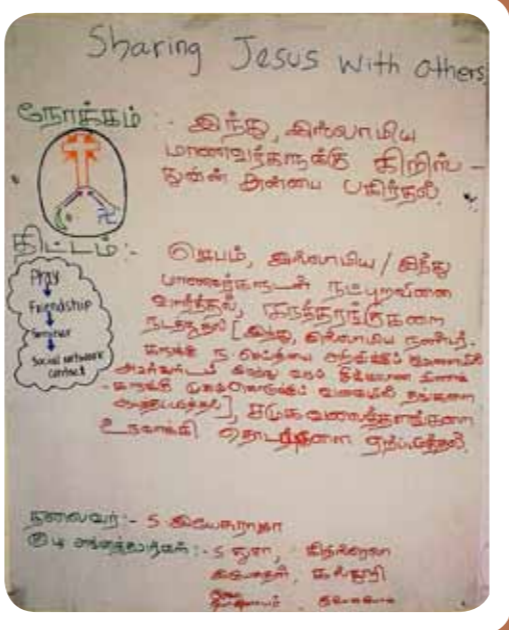
**Caring for the Environment**

- Much wastage occurs within the system - in lecture halls, canteens, hostels and photocopy booths .
- A greater awareness of the costs of wastage is needed.
- Solutions, including lifestyle changes, must be discussed in order for resources to be used better.
- The need to recognize the environment as part of God's creation for enjoyment and relationship.



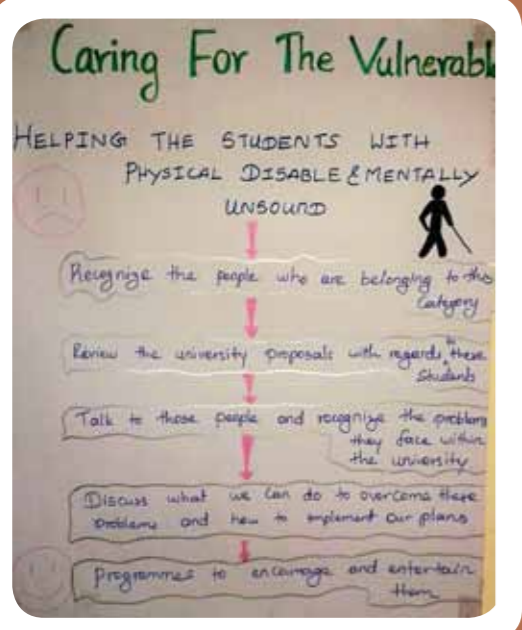
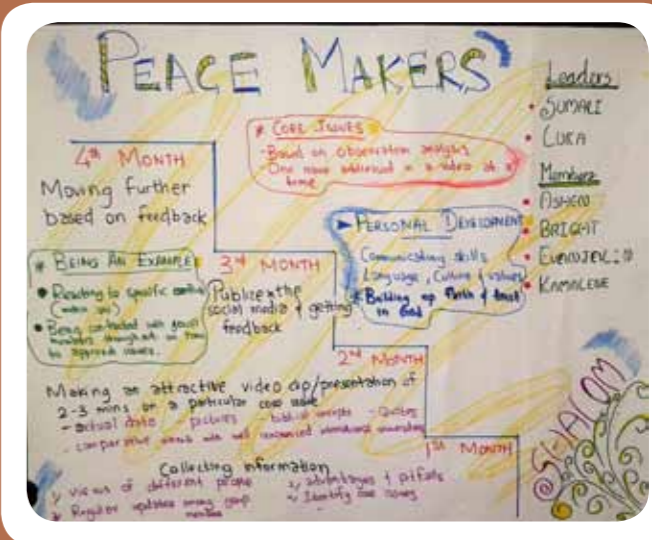
**Study and Research**

- There is a need for us to break down the view that our academic training is separate from who we are.
- We must recover the joy of learning, and not see it as merely a means to acquiring qualifications.
- We must develop critical thinking in order to see the issues prevalent in our fields in a balanced manner.
- We must ask "whom are we serving?" when engaging in research and academic pursuits.



**Being Peacemakers**

- There are many divisions within the university system – some are overt while others are under the surface.
- There is a great need to reflect on the underlying causes of divisions rather than looking for short term solutions.
- A culture of listening and dialogue does not exist within the university system.
- Most groups within the university are homogeneous and do not foster mutual learning.



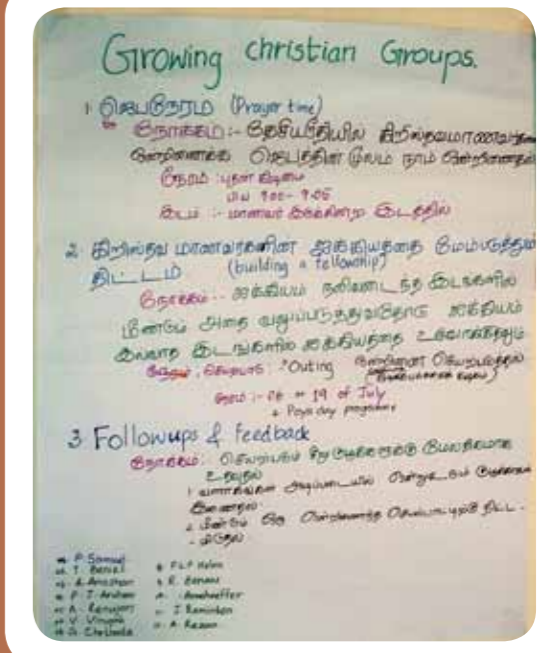
**Caring for the Vulnerable**

- Many students among us come from poor and underprivileged backgrounds.
- A number of students suffer silently because of a culture of shame and fear.
- There is a need to develop safe and confidential platforms for victims of violence and injustice to share their stories.
- The responsible authorities need to be held accountable for their indifference and/or the neglect of their duties.



**Growing Christian Groups**

- Many State universities do not have a corporate witness to Christ.
- Some universities have one or a few Christians in isolated environments.
- Some Christian groups are homogeneous and struggle to incorporate diversity in their membership.
- Private universities and institutes also require a Christian presence.
- There exists a growing need to minister to the international students among us.



# Dear Graduates... Thank you!

Dear sponsors of today (graduates)  
I've just now heard about the additional expenses you have made per head. I really, really want to thank you for that, for if the per head cost had been increased, I wouldn't have attended this camp...  
Yours sincerely,  
Sponsor of tomorrow (upcoming graduate)



This was my first camp. I was able to learn many new things by coming for it. I was able to make some changes to myself, and make some resolutions. Therefore I wish to thank you for your support and help. I pray that once I receive my degree I will be able to support camps such as these.



"I have learned a lot from camp. Especially issues that I thought that only I was facing and when I felt so lonely that no one else would understand. Now I realise that its actually not only me but there are so many out there who are also struggling... So I can say that the help you are providing to run FOCUS and specially this camp is not a waste but it's helping many students to change their attitudes and views about university life."

Thank you so much for all you did to make FOCUS National Camp possible! Although I've been a Christian all my life, some of the things I take back from camp are things I could never learn from church. Hearing the thoughts of former university students, I gained a new perspective on both my life in university as well as my spiritual life - namely, that they are not separate entities!"

"You have made great sacrifices in order that we may grow in Christ just as you have done! Not only have you helped us, but you have also been role-models to us. You have opened the way for us to one day guide those younger than us on the right path."



"I am so glad that I joined FOCUS as a university student. I thank those graduates who have, through the FOCUS ministry, either directly or indirectly, helped us know Jesus and live for him in society. Through this camp I was able to understand the true purpose of our lives. Through this we were able to learn how to glorify God through my studies."

"We thank you for all your help, financial and otherwise, for the FOCUS camp. This camp was helpful to me particularly as a university student. It stretched me in my Christian life. It increased my spiritual thirst. It also encouraged me a great deal. For all this I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to you."

"It is very encouraging to know that you have spent your money and time for us even though you may have to spend them for various things in your life...I ask that you pray for us, as we would like to be like you in the future!"



"I thank you all from the bottom of my heart. Though our spiritual life is our own responsibility, I thank you for all your help in enabling us to understand the purpose for which we have been called to the university, to grow in the Spirit, and to be used for God... Once I complete my university life I hope to join with you in ministry."



"I'm very thankful to you for your commitment to God so that we could have a very useful and valuable camp and teaching. And I hope in the future I also can commit to him in the way you do now."

"Thank you for the contribution you are making to building the faith among university students. I have learned many things from this camp, especially how to be a role-model and make non-Christians ask questions about Christ and to then share the gospel among them."

"My father is in full-time ministry. His income is just enough to keep us out of debt. Therefore it is difficult to attend camps such as these. I was only able to pay a small amount, however, thanks to your love and care for us in the Spirit, I was able to participate."

"Your help with regards to the FOCUS national camp is really great... A desire to serve God in the university has grown in my heart through this camp. I have decided to share the gospel with many more students. I have also learnt love, friendship and patience."



"I have made a promise that I will carry the Word of God to my colleagues in the following four months. And I've made good friends all over the country with whom I can share my struggles and problems and enhance my faith. Your sacrifice means a lot to us. Thank you!"



"I gained many things through this camp. For instance, I learned what God's call for me in the university is. I also was able to meet many new friends, especially Sinhalese students!"



"I learned a lot and I changed my behaviour and bad habits. I also decided to take on one aspect of university ministry: 'Growing Christian Groups'. I hope to act on this in my university this year, and to see many new students from my university at next year's camp."