



## Looking Back Twenty Years

By M. Santosh Kumar

*The Union of Evangelical Students of India [http://www.uesi.org.in/] in an interdenominational non-profit organization that seeks to evangelize and disciple students so that they may serve the Lord Jesus Christ in the Church and in society at large.*

I cannot forget the first UESI [http://www.uesi.org.in/] Writer's Workshop we announced in 1988. Only four persons registered, but our resource person had wanted at least five candidates, so it was cancelled. My sons, John and Timothy (then 8- and 7-year-olds), had packed their things and were all agog, ready to go, only to be disappointed. A fifth person from the far north of India expressed an interest in coming, but by then it was too late. You can't unscramble a scrambled egg, you know.

Despite this inauspicious start, UESI (Union of Evangelical Students of India) now conducts a national-level Writer's Workshop every year, usually at Highfield, its conference centre in Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu, India. Normally, a WW (Writer's Workshop, not World War!) has a duration of 4 days. The fees cover the food charges only. UESI Publication Trust meets the deficit. Usually, participants are encouraged to write for our flagstaff magazine, *Campus Link* [campuslink@hotmail.com]. This is mutually beneficial. Nothing encourages a writer more than getting published.

### Rich Resources

Avy Varghese, a journalist, starred in the first WW conducted in 1989; John Daniel, a journalist, and Tilly Sojwal, a professional writer, in 1990. More trainers were recruited. We learned that having too many resource persons is not ideal. We cancelled some more events along the way, but eventually succeeded in having national and state-level WWs all over India.

Arul Manohar, a state UESI staff, kept attending the WWs and ended up as a constant companion and resource person. Now we mix and match trainers. If there are local writers or editors, we do use them. We also have an interesting line-up of speakers who help out whenever they are available: Babu K. Verghese, a media consultant from Mumbai; New Zealander Dr Beulah Wood, a professor at the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies [http://www.saiacs.org/] in Bangalore; and Seline Augustine, a journalist from Chennai.

### Our Formula, Is There One?

What do we offer? We get WW participants—college students, graduates, and UESI staff—to introduce themselves and their ambitions freely. We try to remove any mental blocks they might have. We put up handwritten posters of inspiring quotes on writing, conduct brainstorming sessions, and assign them subjects and titles to write on—right from their mouths.

The fire is lit, actually, with an innocuous "Free Writing" session: no topic, no rules. My, people just freak out and you have to hold their pens to get them to stop once they

poise them on paper. Then, there are sessions on arranging one's ideas, style, clear writing, creative writing, features, titles, revision, writing for the secular market, and other topics. We pass on time-tested principles of writing. We even tell WW candidates that they themselves can surely write a book or booklet on writing by the time they leave, as they are bombarded with so many ideas and resource material.

People are encouraged to write during the workshop. For example, in Hyderabad, we did group writing of an article on "How to Do Expository Preaching."

The "Instant Poetry" sessions at our WWs began as a lark. At the time, some thought it was sheer fantasy to think they would result in anything worthwhile. But when workshop participants get into the act, ideas are given, sifted, and arranged into lines, and lo and behold, there is a poem on the blackboard!

In a state-level WW in Tamil Nadu, Prof. David the director, made us write one line each of Tamil poetry. I still remember shuddering in my shoes as I went forward, by faith, to the blackboard.

The group dynamics of seeing others write invariably works. We write together. Some is frivolous stuff, some stuffy, and some turns out well. Then the writers' fellowship sits together to read out and evaluate—or "speak the truth in love"—each other's pieces.

At a typical WW, we do not sing many songs, especially "tarrying songs," until the latecomers arrive. We do not take this opportunity to preach at people. There is but a brief devotion by a participant every morning during the worship session. There is more individual praying than group prayer.

### **Encouraging One Another**

To enable the state UESI staff to conduct their own WWs, especially in regional languages, we conducted a Writer Trainers' Workshop at Highfield with staff and

graduates from four southern states. We taught them how to conduct WW sessions and even let them take sessions and evaluate them. The training had the desired results.

We want each state to have a WW every year. We encourage district and city level WWs, as people often find it difficult to travel, take leave, and find the money necessary to attend. There is usually a drop-out rate of 10 percent. We go ahead with a minimum of 10 persons and a maximum of 20. I would say that 15 is an ideal number for interaction and individual care. This allows participants to make friends; they will encourage one another later.

Discouragement is a disease typical of writers, which they best fight together.

We encourage those who have attended our WWs to attend again as they reach higher levels of thinking and productivity as years go by. Many aspiring writers give up, discouraged that their writing is not readily accepted, but if a little encouragement comes along the way, quite a few would like to be full-time Christian writers. (Me, too!)

We in the UESI Publications Unit try to keep in touch with those who have attended the WWs. We offer to edit their articles—and publish them, too, if they are in English and meant for the *Campus Link* audience.

I wish more Christian publishers come forward to encourage first-time writers. Some of our WW participants have published themselves, too. May their tribe increase!

We tell WW candidates not to wait for another WW to write again. Some do. The old idea that one must have the perfect setting and the right mood for inspiration to strike dies hard. We insist that "Writing is the work of a slave," quoting Charles H. Spurgeon, known popularly as the Prince of Preachers, who wrote some 135 books. And what is the result of our efforts? Some have become writers; some came emphatically saying "Writing is not my cup

of tea,” but went away enthused, having discovered their skill. We often hear candidates say something like this: “I want to express my deep sense of gratitude for all your effort in training us. I was inspired! THANK YOU!” Such words are truly our reward.

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