

## SMALL BEGINNINGS

by Fran Downes

Let's go on an international journey in quest of the least coin, to discover what it is doing in six continents around the world. The Fellowship of the Least Coin has been referred to as one of the most remarkable calls to international sharing of our times, and it is a powerful influence for good that women have. It also can be thought of as a modern miracle.

We must start on our journey in Japan, because the Fellowship of the Least Coin was born out of the distress caused when a bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. On our way we meet with an American woman writer who has decided for herself to find out what anything so meagre as a least coin can do. She visited ten nations where the women themselves explained how they were trying to help to the best of their abilities in housing, food shortages, famine and floods. As this American writer travelled round she found, among these Asian women, what the power of prayer does in their lives. She also said, "I have caught the spirit of the least coin which shares concern for every race and creed."

It is not in this American writer that our interest lies, but in an Indian woman - Shanti Solomon (whose first name means "peace", and her surname "wisdom").

To understand how much the Fellowship of the Least Coin can mean, both to women who have nothing and to women who have everything, we need to listen to Mrs. Shanti Solomon as she unfolds her dream - the yearnings of her heart for uneducated, deserted women, whether in the African bush, Vietnam ricefields, or in Australia - that women may have a new sense of their own identity and of their kinship with other women around the world.

Shanti, even though she holds two degrees, is so humble, and she really cares. She knows what it is to be hungry and without money, and about injustice - her father was murdered because he became a Christian.

In 1956 the National Council of Presbyterian Women in U.S.A. sponsored a group of six women - one Japanese, one Indian and four American - for a Pacific tour to take in Alaska, Korea, Japan, the Phillipines and Hong Kong. The purpose of these visits was to strengthen a world-wide Christian fellowship among women

- \* to share mutual joy and concern,
- \* to study the Bible,
- \* to pray together and to re-affirm that all of us are the members of one family in Christ.

This team first visited Tokyo where together they planned their continuing trip; but the postwar bitterness from one country to another and towards the American women, because of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, dismayed them.

And then the Japanese team member and Shanti were refused visas for Korea. The rest of the women wanted to call off the visits to the other countries, but Shanti said, "No, you go on as planned. I want to ponder all this in my heart. I will wait for you in Manila with our Christian friends, studying to see if perhaps I myself have wrong thoughts."

She said to herself - the wounds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are still raw - that I can understand - but the Americans too lost many of their sons in the tragedy of war. As Shanti searched her Bible she found the answer she was looking for in the story of the Good Samaritan who helped the man who fell among thieves. She said, "we village women in India have drawn away our skirts from the troubled war-torn mothers and children everywhere. We have been like the priest who passed on the other side, saying 'this is not my business'."

Shanti was still pondering while she and a group of women in a Manila church read together the Gospel of Mark. When they reached the twelfth chapter - where Jesus comments that the widow who gave her two small coins, worth one cent, had given more than any other person because she had given all she had, Shanti's heart gave a great leap. The widow's mite - that is the answer!

You have to give yourself along with your least coin - real giving is throwing off pride - only when our hearts are empty of self can God fill them with love and forgiveness.

Why could we not start a fellowship where all women - any woman - shall pray for another in a different land?

There must be some token of her concern - possibly the smallest coin of her country - which, like the widow's mite, would help sick or troubled people everywhere and bring about reconciliation between people.

When the rest of the team met again with Shanti in Manila and she told them of her idea, the American women said, "We do not think our church women back home would want to be bothered saving only twelve pennies every year."

"That is what is wrong with you Americans", Shanti pointed out. "You do not understand how humiliating it is to be always on the receiving end as we are in Asia. The paisa, the least coin of my country, is only worth a fraction of an American penny, but even the poorest village woman can afford to give it to someone worse off than she is."

"The village woman needs to do this for her own sake to stand up proudly. It is important that the rich and poor, educated and illiterate, can give on the same level. If you of the West draw aside you will be the loneliest women in the world - your great wealth has divided us - let's see if the least coin can draw us together."

After a few months the American women back home gladly joined the Fellowship of the Least Coin.

The idea of praying and giving - person to person on an equal basis in both East and West - has swept around the world, and now is to be found in the six continents and in over 80 countries.

This is not another denomination - or an organisation with monthly meetings and deadly dull reports. It must be a sharing by women everywhere, insisted Shanti, regardless of political or theological differences. It sprang up in the Far East, in India and Manila - spread through all Asia - then leapt the oceans to the West - because it answered the desperate need of women everywhere.

The decision that individual women as well as groups might join the Fellowship of the Least Coin has opened the door of participation to Roman Catholic women and others, but surprise was shown when Buddhist and Moslem women applied for membership of this Christian women's movement. And the answer was, "Why not? You pray to the same God, and if you want to help in Christlike giving to the needy of all nations - Welcome". After all, how can we foster the peaceable kingdom unless we exhibit equal tolerance ourselves? Our job as women is to show love.

You cannot see a prayer or an atom, but both can have great power for good.

If only women all over the world taught understanding in their homes to their children, who knows what might happen? To release this power may take time, but what other practical way is there to help this world of ours?

It was never dreamt that after 19 years, over one and a half million dollars would be given for projects around the world.

Trying to put into the words of Spanish or English, or any other language, how the women of the Fellowship of the Least Coin are helping in relief work for the sick, homeless and own-trodden of six continents, is rather like describing a sunrise to a blind person - all one can do is give a feeling of colour and glory!

As a major part of Least Coin offerings is spent on relief work and evangelism, it was also decided to reserve some for ventures of international fellowship among women, or to send women delegates to ecumenical meetings, because when women meet each other in person, forgiveness becomes easier. The movement to unite all women in prayer and mutual giving took a great leap forward whenever women of cultural and political differences met face to face.

The first information about Fellowship of the Least Coin came to us here in Australia in 1963, when the Australian Council of Churches received a cheque for \$1,000 from the women of Asia for work among Aboriginal girls.

Imagine our surprise on receiving this money, and our embarrassment that the women of Asia, where utmost poverty is to be found, sent us Australians this gift. What a humbling experience this was! In 1964 the Fellowship of the Least Coin began here, quietly spreading from one State to another.

God has blessed many participants, and likewise recipients. Although these least coins were never considered to be the most significant part of the Fellowship - these combined gifts have encouraged thousands of women to enjoy international Christian

Fellowship and to share in the healing power of love, in witnessing to Christ's love for mankind.

Thus a modern miracle was born. It has brought together women round the world in prayer and reconciliation - for when we have prayed and when we have listened, only then can we give our least coin token.

Unfortunately, so many women here in Australia have not caught the real vision. They seem to think it is just giving money - 5 cents, 10 cents or even 20 cents - an not even a prayer. It would not matter if we did not give the coin - except for the equal sharing with our Asian sisters.

Never before as now, are our prayers for reconciliation and peace for the world needed more. We are the nation builders of the world, leaders in our own right. Our life is indeed a many splendoured thing. It is we who know the miracle of loving and being loved. The wonders of the modern world have been laid at our feet, giving us time to live, work and to be quiet.

Our boundaries of love and service have extended beyond our homes into the cities, the slums and the outlying villages. The world has become our parish. We have become the eyes of the world. May we be aware of our many-splendoured lives, and our responsibilities in our homes and in the eyes of the nation. Remember we can no longer live on our individual islands, that we cannot live alone, and that we all belong to the same world.

#### A FELLOWSHIP PRAYER

*Father, we would pray that it is not with a careless hand that we give our coin, even if it does not mean much to us. We pray for the women in other countries who give their least coins like us, but go without their evening bread to share from their poverty.*

*Father, within your cup which feeds your lambs, our coins, through You, become the golden coin of fellowship and love. Amen.*

N.B. The Devotional Handbook of the Fellowship of the Least Coin is "The Circle of Prayer", and it contains monthly prayers for use by women all over the world as they participate in the Fellowship. The Symbol on the cover is six pairs of folded praying hands, representing the six continents.