I had the privilege of being invited to the ACC Emerging Leaders Award Camp earlier this year. The camp, conceived by the late Rev. Don Purdey, brings together young leaders nominated by ACC churches for three days of fellowship, teaching and training. The experiences I had over those three days have changed the way I view God, myself and our collective role as Christians on earth, and I’m hoping that these words are one way I can pass my experience on to others.

It’s hard to find the right words to describe the camp as a whole, but “intense” is probably right up there. From beginning to finish, barely a moment was wasted; the program was packed with talks, small group discussions, worship, activities and other events. That was not to mention mealtimes and breaks, which were no less important because of the conversations had and relationships forged. We probably packed weeks of experiences into every day, and came out of it feeling as if we’d known each other all our lives.

Keynote sessions were held throughout the camp with a series of church and ACC leaders speaking: Rod James, Mark Schultz, Simon Dent, and Derek and Jodi Schiller. The central focus of the camp was leadership in the church, and the speakers unpacked that topic considerably from different angles. We learned about our commission to leadership as Christians, how we can develop and grow as leaders and help others to do the same, and about Jesus’ own approach to ministry. Being an avid note-taker, I was kept very busy by the insights, experiences and advice offered by the speakers. One thing emphasised from the very first talk and reinforced by the rest, was that all leadership and ministry belongs to Christ: without him, we can do nothing, and so we should take care to always trust and depend on him, not on ourselves. Another point that stuck with me was that every Christian is called to be a leader: it is not for some chosen few (such as preachers, pastors and worship leaders) but for all.

Helpfully, the sessions were usually followed almost immediately by small group discussions. Due to numbers there was only one men’s small group compared to two for the girls, so we all got to know each other fairly well. The small groups provided a great forum to ask questions and discuss challenging issues raised by the talk; we had a great mix of personalities and backgrounds in our group and it was very interesting to hear and take on board others’ perspectives and experiences. Derek Schiller joined us from time to time and had invaluable wisdom to offer on growing in ministry and dealing with tough theological issues like the problem of sin (Romans 7:14-25) and how we are to treat women in light of some of the more difficult passages in the New Testament.

Aside from the keynote sessions and small group times, there were plenty of other opportunities for teaching and for connecting with God. Worship services were held every morning in the chapel on site. Between songs of praise and times of prayer, a leader would share a devotion or personal testimony about God. Talks were given on the purpose and mission of the ACC, and on theological study options, both of which I found interesting and informative (I have since started part-time study at Bible College SA). We also had our choice of electives on Saturday afternoon: I chose Public Speaking & Worship Leading and Faith Sharing, both skills I wanted to learn but lacked confidence in. Both sessions were very worthwhile and I have already had occasion to apply what I have learned in the time since. I only wish I could have attended some of the others as well!

Thus far I have only really spoken about the teaching, but that really is only half the story. The times in between sessions were filled with fellowship. Mealtimes were a great opportunity to connect with other awardees and also leaders. Outdoor activities like soccer and water balloon throwing were taken to with great enthusiasm, which nearly compensated for the lack of skill on display. Saturday night’s formal dinner was a memorable occasion highlighted by an address from Lynn Arnold, an ex-Premier of South Australia and now an Anglican deacon. Finally, the camp concert was memorable in a different way, featuring some impressive talent and some side-splittingly hilarious routines.

Above all, the attitudes of the camp leaders spoke loudest to me. From start to finish, in all aspects of the camp, they would jump in whenever they saw a need, often in ways one might not normally associate with leadership; from engaging people in conversation and ensuring everyone was involved, to gathering up used cutlery after dinner. They demonstrated, simply and very clearly, that Christian leadership – true leadership – is about service. I had known that intellectually, and Jesus Himself has said it (Matthew 20:25-27), but to see it lived out was something quite different, like nothing I’d ever experienced. Moreover, as the camp went on, all of us awardees began to imitate the leaders as they imitated Christ. There was no divide between leaders and everyone else; everyone led, everyone served. The community was a place you wanted to be, and perhaps a glimpse of God’s kingdom to come.

Leading is serving. Every Christian is to be a leader. And all leadership, ultimately, is by Christ, through Christ and for Christ. My prayer for myself individually, and for the church as a whole, is that God would move in our hearts to make all these things a reality in our lives.