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# *Admiring the Ashes or Keeping the Flame Alive?*

*Between Rebellion and Tradition:  
How WSCF History can be an Inspiration for Truth and Reconciliation?*

*These days, it has become extremely popular in church circles across Europe to talk about reconciliation. As the ecumenical process of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) reached a bit of a deadlock in the early nineties, more and more ecumenically minded people have found that the issue of reconciliation should be the top priority of the European churches. This development was most visibly symbolised by choosing "reconciliation" as the theme for the second European Ecumenical Assembly (EEA 2) in Graz 1997.*

*Indeed it seems that Europe and the world need reconciliation. The divisions of the Cold War are still in our memory and hearts, the divisions between North and South carry on, old conflicts which we had hoped had been overcome, erupt with new brutality and in regions like the Caucasus or the Middle East the logic of war triumphs. While we might with good reasons reject the notion that we are witnessing a "clash of civilisations" (Samuel P. Huntington), we have to acknowledge that in many conflicts of our days, churches and religious communities play at least an ambivalent role, in some situations even actively contribute to unreconciled situations.*

## **WSCF HISTORY: DISCOVERING A HIDDEN TREASURE FOR RECONCILIATION**

Thus we as WSCF and as young ecumenically minded persons in general, need to identify what could be our role in promoting reconciliation through and within the churches so "that all may be one." If our contribution is to be a meaningful one, we should avoid the trap of a cheap, naïve and non-reflected "let us all be a big happy family" understanding of reconciliation and community – an understanding which has in recent years too often prevailed in the ecumenical youth movement in Europe (see the debates around the World Youth Day 2000 or the European Ecumenical Encounter 2001).

As WSCF we find an enormous treasure and inspiration in our own history, in the walks of lives of those men and – from the very early days – women who kept the Federation alive over the past more than hundred years. The history of those forefathers and foremothers of WSCF contains some of the most important elements of the development of modern ecumenical thinking.

The development could be described as a path between rebellion and reconciliation, between maintaining traditions of the Church and reforming the Church in view of present-day challenges. It also included the insight that reconciliation could not be a cheap movement of forgetting the past and neglecting existing differences, but needed truth, debate and careful analysis. WSCF has for more than hundred years been at the forefront of this development.

## **QUESTIONING TRADITIONAL ALLEGIANCES**

Already the foundation of WSCF was a rather extraordinary move. In 1895, the colonial powers of Europe were still deeply involved in efforts to colonise large regions of

Asia and Africa according to their national interests. Quite often mission societies were happy to lend a helping hand to these colonial activities. The WSCF founding father John R. MOTT, a US-American Methodist, also had his mind set on the "conquest of the world" – a conquest of a different kind however – "the evangelisation of the world in this generation."

It was clear to MOTT that this endeavour had to include Christians of all nations and denominations. At that time this was an extremely daring attitude, which was challenging traditional understandings of allegiance of Christians to their own nation or denomination.

This transnational component of WSCF underwent difficult times in World War I, as Christians fought on both sides of the war. However, the community of WSCF continued as members on all sides of the conflict continued to pray for one another. WSCF was among the few organisations where Christians from both sides met immediately after the war to discuss in openness why this war had come about and how future generations could avoid falling into the trap of war. They dared to ask the question whether Christians could take up arms. They dared to ask this question knowing full well that they were very likely to disagree about the answer to it (a very radical position even asked whether we believe in the same Christ).

## **RISKING CONFLICT**

Another important conflict, which WSCF addressed at a very early point, was the racial question. The *Student World* (SW) of October 1930 dealt with "aspects of the inter-racial situation." In June of the same year, an SCM conference in South Africa brought together black, white and coloured students as well as Indians under the leadership of a WSCF Executive Committee member. A racially mixed meeting of this kind was at that time an unprecedented event in South Africa.

There was immediate criticism from the leadership of the white South African movement, who expressed that such a meeting was incompatible with "the country's feeling in the matter of social intermingling." As this quotation shows, WSCF had once again given priority of the Biblical message over other considerations, such as diplomacy. I also find it noteworthy that we can, in this statement, recognise the pattern of describing a certain approach as "not in line with a country's feeling or tradition" – an argument we know from the heated debates of our days, too. The Federation was willing to risk a conflict, which would continue for years, but in the end resulted in the churches' denunciation of racism as a sin and in overcoming racial segregation.

A last example is the story of WSCF in the sixties and seventies, a time when "liberation" and "liberation struggle" were the central key words of the Federation. Liberation was understood differently – in Europe, the SCMs to a large extent had a Marxist materialist understanding of it, in North America the anti-institutional drive was strong, in Africa and Asia an anti-colonial sentiment prevailed – all



factors, which caused heated debates and in the end led to the regionalisation of the Federation.

### REINTERPRETING THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE

It was once again a moment where SCMs reinterpreted the biblical message in view of their contemporary situation and very often found answers which were contextual – and often against the mainstream debate in the Church of that time. In daring to provoke conflict, they gave a boost to new theology in the ecumenical movement.

Central concepts which have shaped the ecumenical debates in the following decades were developed in the WSCF of these days. It is part of this episode in WSCF history that the debate between the activists of these days still continues – as we can see in the different attempts to come to terms with this part of WSCF histories in the publications of the nineties (see the books of Philip POTTER and Risto LEHTONEN).

### PROMOTING A DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDING OF RECONCILIATION

Nowadays it seems that all the questions have been asked and all the fights been fought. What can be the role of an organisation, a movement such as WSCF in promoting reconciliation? I believe that we can see from these few examples from our history that the role of WSCF lies in addressing questions of reconciliation in the spirit of truth, acknowledging that this truth might be painful to face and at times involve a difficult process.

It is a role which understands tradition as treasure, a treasure that must be constantly re-examined in the light of the reality of a particular time and place and in view of the question what the biblical message for this time and place would be. It is a role of acknowledging and cherishing conflict and dissent as an important part of a joint process, despite the anger, frustration and sometimes despair this conflict might bring along.

### POSITIVE EXAMPLES TODAY

One of the positive examples of WSCF in our days is the discussion on globalisation – the question of reconciling a world deeply divided into rich and poor, into those profiting from existing markets and those being reduced to sheer commodities in the global economy. WSCF has started to address these questions in its work from the early nineties onwards (eg. the panel on globalisation at the WSCF General Assembly in Yamoussoukro in 1995). Many issues discussed at that time are by now commonplaces in public discussions.

WSCF is, however, in a position – like only few other organisations – to work on a global response, to accept that the answers from radical, activism-oriented SCMs in, for example, Asia Pacific will be different ones than those of SCMs from, perhaps, Central and Eastern Europe, who will be evaluating very carefully and cautiously all the blueprints for an alternative, just and sustainable alternative to capitalist globalisation

on the basis of their past experience with state socialism (the last big blueprint ideology claiming to present an alternative to capitalism). I see the sometimes painful tension in this kind of discussions is an enormous asset, which we should use more coherently and creatively.

Another important discussion of reconciliation, more directly addressing the Church and its own life, is the question of the Church as an inclusive community. In recent years WSCF has not only seen vivid discussions on new forms of partnership between women and men, but developed into one of the most important for a in which groups of gay and lesbian Christians have voiced their desire to be acknowledged as an integral part of the community of saints which the Church represents. It was WSCF who hosted a hearing at the EEA 2 in Graz on the role of gays and lesbians in the Church. Hardly any other issues has turned out to be as divisive as this one, hardly any issue has so many socio-ethical, theological and ecclesiological implications.

As an organisation representing the ecumenical youth, WSCF should also continue to address the role of young people in the Church. At the EEA 2 in 1997, a group of young delegates and youth organisations lobbied and achieved the result that the final text of the assembly would not only speak about a “flow of love between the generations” (paragraph A24), but would also acknowledge a “rupture between the generations” (A17). Is WSCF prepared to continue pressing for a debate how young people’s gifts can be acknowledged and used in the Church?

### WSCF HISTORY: AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO LOOK FURTHER

What made the Federation great and at times a true agent of reconciliation was the willingness of courageous women and men to follow Jesus in his liberating message and to “enlist students in the world of extending the kingdom of Christ throughout the whole world” (WSCF declaration of objectives of 1895). This included the daring attitude of valuing the universal Biblical message higher than any allegiance to any nation, ideology, denomination or class.

At the moment, however, most churches are taking a step back and are spending most of their energy to defend the status quo of denominational, national or economic interest. We have to dare to oppose this trend today and value higher that in Christ “there is no East no West.” In this way we can once again become true agents of reconciliation.

#### Suggested Reading

HUNTINGTON Samuel P., *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*. London–NewYork, 1998.

LEHTONEN Risto, *Story of a Storm. The Ecumenical Student Movement in the Turmoil of Revolution*.

Cambridge–Helsinki, 1998.

POTTER Philip – WIESER Thomas, *Seeking and Serving the Truth. The first Hundred Years of the World Student Christian Federation*. Geneva, 1997.

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