

Philip POTTER

# Touched in Our Entire Condition: The Lives and Times of WSCF

Interview by NAGYPÁL Szabolcs for *Student World*

*The long and glorious life of WSCF is inextricably entwined with the lives of the many people whose names are scattered throughout the pages of her history. One such name is Philip POTTER, one of the greatest living figures in the ecumenical movement, whose active involvement in the Federation spanned four and a half decades.*

*Although now retired, Philip POTTER remains in contact with the organisation with whom so much of his history is shared. Here, he reminisces with Student World about his own life and the lives of many other people who are responsible for shaping the present condition of ecumenism, and he puts forth a vision and a challenge for the rising generation of young people who are just now taking their place in the life of the Federation and the Church.*

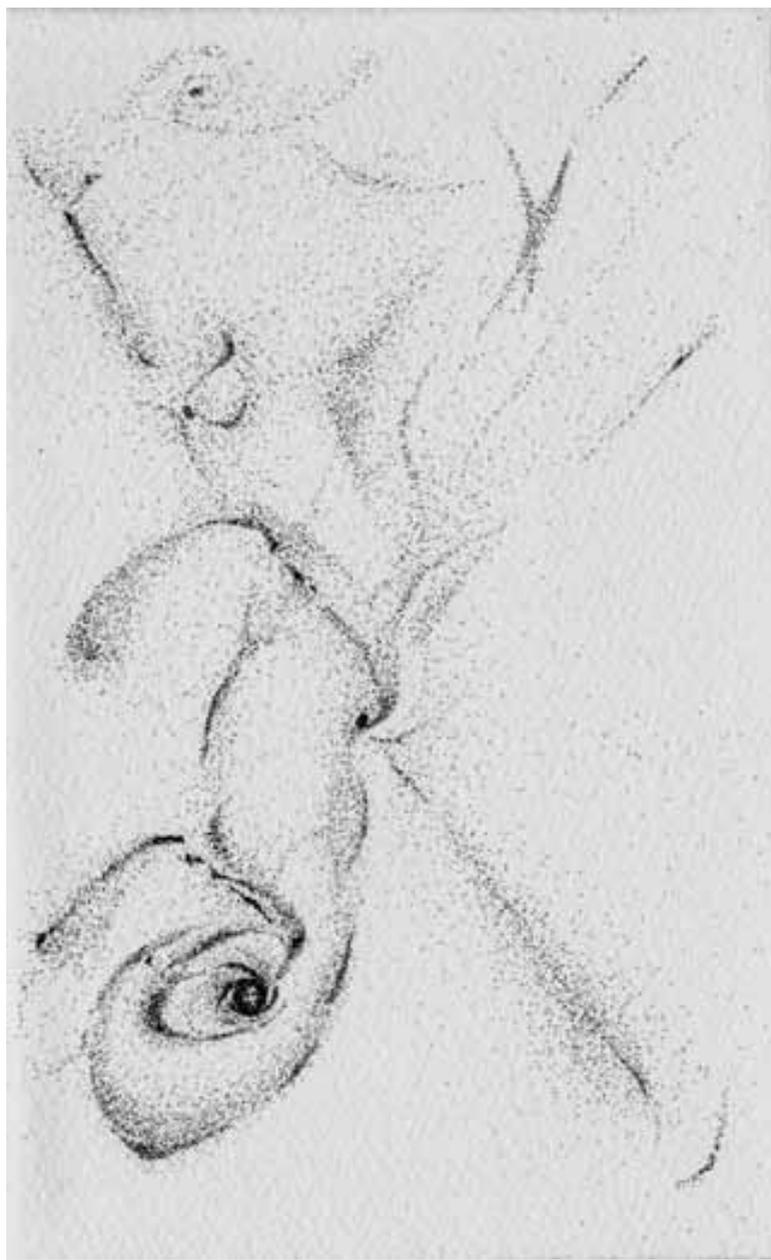
**SW:** *You were one of the chief architects of the ecumenical movement. Please, tell us about your relationship with the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) and the Student Christian Movement (SCM).*

**PP:** My relationship with the Federation began when I started my theology studies in 1944. I arrived at Kingston, Jamaica, where we had a theological college and after one week there was a meeting of the SCM where I was sent, and I came out of the meeting having been made a study secretary, a person who does everything from arranging meetings to suggesting ideas. During the three years I spent in Jamaica I kept this position in the SCM, which was made up of theological students, people training for agriculture, cultural experts and teachers.

When I went to England to finish my studies, there was the world conference of Christian students in Oslo in 1947 and I represented the SCM from Jamaica

---

Philip POTTER is a Methodist minister from Dominica. He was involved in the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) from the early 1940s and served as the chairperson of the Federation from 1960 to 1968. From 1972 until 1984 he was the general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC).



and the Caribbean there. The following year there was the inauguration of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam and I was present as the leader of the youth delegation at the meeting. I addressed the assembly and thanked Willem VISSER T'HOOF, who was the first general secretary of WCC, but came to that meeting as the general secretary of WSCF. In this meeting one could see that all of us present there were people who had been involved in the Federation in one way or another.

Then I was a pastor in Haiti for a few years, which was an incredibly rich experience as I came from the university world and had to work with people who were almost totally illiterate. But one thing you learn from the SCM is to always have direct contact and exchange with people and I very quickly understood that they may be illiterate, but they were no fools. And I learned a great deal from those people in the four years I lived there.

From there I went to Geneva to work in the youth department of WCC. Most of the time we were a team of five, but we were in direct contact with the headquarters of WSCF and we knew about the life and work there. From there I went to London working as a responsible chief of West Africa and West Indies for the Methodist church.

After I had spent six years there, I travelled to Africa just when the SCMs were being established there. I played some role in that, so Africa became very much a concern of mine. Of course, in the youth department of WCC I had to travel around the world, so I got quite a lot of involvement in Asia, Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Africa. Latin America came much later.

Then I went back to Geneva, as a responsible person for world mission and evangelism and as an associate general secretary of WCC from 1967 to 1972, when I was elected general secretary and I did that for twelve years. I finished in 1984, when my wife and I went to Jamaica and we taught at the university for five years, which was an experience I would have liked to last longer, being involved with the students there. My last involvement before retirement was with students and with the SCM.

*SW: WSCF started as a Protestant mission-minded movement. How did the Orthodox and later the Roman Catholic students get involved in the Federation?*

*PP:* Scandinavia played an important role in that. Karl FRIES and others had contacts in Russia, and John R. MOTT went there once. They formed relationships with others. One of the things the SCM did for us was to make us naturally relate to each other. We had to come to talk to each other and that is where the SCM was influential in the Orthodox world, with the emphasis so much on the liturgy.

There were quite a number of young people and also some of the metropolitans, who were interested. In 1911 the Federation had a big conference in Constantinople and there was a young man there who was playing an active part in it, who later became a very great patriarch.

Roman Catholics were involved very early, especially in Central Europe: in Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, as well as in France. It was not very easy in

those rather stiff years, but there were in different places these kinds of contacts, and it is quite interesting to see that when Vatican II was convened, there was an immediate relationship between Rome and Geneva.

I myself had close relations with three popes: Paul VI, who had to carry out Vatican II and I stayed in the Vatican and we used to discuss those things. I knew John Paul I very well in Venice and we actually became close friends. When he became pope, he phoned me and told me that he wanted me to be present at his inauguration. Unfortunately, he only lived as pope for 33 days.

Then we had John Paul II. He was a student in Germany and he did his doctorate there as well. He came in touch with the SCM and when he became Pope I spoke with him, but the most moving thing was when leaving WCC he visited Geneva two weeks before I left and we spent a whole day out together with the staff and we had open, honest private discussions; then we made a joint closing service together.

**SW:** *What was the main contribution of WSCF to the ecumenical movement?*

**PP:** WSCF was a community of thinking and acting together. Our famous saying was: "One must have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other." And when we spoke about the Bible, we tried to get at the heart of the message of the Bible. The Bible itself represents the word of God to the humans, and when you go to the Bible itself, humans are touched in their entire condition. And the newspaper represents what the condition of the world is today.

There is the interaction between God's word, God's message and the whole attitude, all issues of justice and love and truth; and the newspapers which tell about where people are right now. That is one of the great contributions of the SCM that helped a lot of generations to know that we have to have a constant dialogue between where we are, who we are, what is going on, and God, Who spoke to us through Christ and the Holy Spirit. But the Bible is not an abstract book; it is all about human beings in all their conditions. And the SCM played quite a role in emphasising that.

**SW:** *Publications played an important role in WSCF and Student World is considered to be the first ecumenical journal in the world, started in 1908. What was the profile of Student World and which role did it play in the ecumenical movement?*

**PP:** *Student World* played a very significant role, since it was practically – at that time – the only Christian intellectual journal of worldwide distribution. If one goes through it, one will see what kind of people wrote it: all the great theologians of the age. Karl BARTH started as a student and wrote through his massive books of theology.

*Student World* played a very important role intellectually and by sharing it across the world, it became a means of bringing out people in expressing themselves. But then we went through a bad patch and it was suspended for a while, but happily it is back.

*SW: What was the vision of John R. MOTT about the Federation leadership?*

**PP:** MOTT came from a wealthy, good family and he studied at university. He was a Methodist and studied theology too, and then he married. He was a tall man, very imposing, an agile, athletic type; and he had a very impressive face. He could carry everybody.

Even though he was ordained, MOTT remained as a layperson. He was only thirty when the Federation was born, she was his big baby. The SCM leaders liberated us to be normal people, without being fussy staff, just normal, dialogical people. That was for me the greatest contribution to the SCM.

*SW: Very early, there were women leaders of the Federation, like Ruth ROUSE and Suzanne DE DIÉTRICH. What was the vision of WSCF about the equality of women and men and the relationship between the genders?*

**PP:** Indeed, one cannot think of the Federation without Ruth ROUSE. She was an English woman who went to Cambridge. She joined the staff of WSCF, even though the Federation never paid her a salary, and for 30 years she was an extraordinary influence in the Federation. She wrote a book on her 30 years there – unfortunately, it was only published in 1948. Ruth ROUSE is for me one of the great saints, a venerable woman indeed.

She influenced Suzanne DE DIÉTRICH, who came from a strong Protestant family: wealthy, they were part of the industrial revolution, some of the first industrialists in Alsace. She broke ranks in her family, because she refused to play the game that a young woman must get married. She went to Lausanne University, far away. She was always in Geneva and she made friends and naturally came into the staff of the Federation. She was also a marvellous writer and speaker. She also played a vital role in creating the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, until she could no longer walk. I used to visit her until she died; it was my privilege to know her.

*SW: You said that many early leaders came from wealthy families and they were also from the United States, United Kingdom or Germany – from powerful countries – so the leadership of WSCF came from wealthy families in wealthy contexts. They were people with solid backgrounds. I think empowerment has become a very crucial concept in our work in WSCF and that is because the leadership should not only come from wealthy countries and wealthy families. Do you have suggestions on how to continue?*

**PP:** It was inevitable that at the beginning people who were free, and who had status could give their lives to the Federation. MOTT could have been anything, but he refused and he spent all his life in this job. We just have to take this as a fact that it was so, and because it was so, they were able to do all they did. They could travel all around the world in the way they did.

Actually, MOTT was not that rich, it was a lady in Chicago who was a millionaire and financed things for the whole rest of his life. Do you find that kind of generosity around nowadays? That is our problem, the bourgeois problem. What they have left behind shows what kind of integrity they had. That has been one of the things that we have learned in the Federation, regardless of the fact whether we came

from rich or poor families. The important thing was the integrity of the cause, and to follow it up. Whatever the consequences would be, we should go ahead.

**SW:** *You said you learned your leadership style in WSCF, which you practiced later on as the chairperson of WSCF, and as the general secretary of WCC. Could you tell us more about the style of WSCF?*

**PP:** The style of WSCF has been one very important point since the very beginning of the SCM and WSCF. We were a community of women and men. We were colleagues and there was no question who would chair or who would do the secretary: either could go. We were pioneers. We took up the issue in WCC and challenged the churches about it. We preferred informal conversations to giving lectures, because it was the SCM style.

**SW:** *What was the relationship between WSCF in the early period and the World Council of Churches (WCC)?*

**PP:** Without WSCF we would not have had the World Council of Churches. It was in the Student Christian Movement that we had informal interactions among the different confessions: Protestants, Anglicans, Orthodox and Roman Catholics. The fact that the Orthodox were within the ecumenical movement since the beginning was due to the Student Christian Movement. When talking about WSCF we have to talk about WCC, because most of us who were involved in WCC in any leadership position owed a tribute to WSCF and we always maintained a regard for her.

**SW:** *You lived in many regions of the Federation. How did this North America- and Europe-based Federation become global, and what was the profile of the six regions before the regionalisation happened?*

**PP:** WSCF is unique in this respect. Before it was even officially formed in 1895, there had been people involved in student work, forty years before. And some of them were missionaries and they went around and started student groups. Japan had student groups around 1880; they were the ones to send the message to a WSCF conference: *Make Jesus King*.

The Chinese and the Indians provided leadership in the Federation very early, because they were very much involved in India and Sri Lanka and Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and South Africa. Latin America came somewhat later, but when it came, it came like a bang.

**SW:** *East and West were divided during the Cold War. What was the role of WSCF in bringing together people from the Eastern and Western blocs?*

**PP:** The cold war was a tough time, but we were still able to maintain many contacts. Because the Church was there, WSCF had to cope with the fact of Communism, especially in the case of the big Orthodox churches. And also when there were difficulties, we would make not too many private representations. In the seventies things were getting easier between the Communist state of the Soviet Union and the Russian Orthodox church.

Once we had to have a little meeting with the government people headed by the president of the state. There was a person who said to me: "How should I address

you?” “Oh,” I said, “it is very easy. Call me ‘brother.’ ” And then he asked me: “And how are you going to address me?” I said: “That is even easier! I will call you ‘comrade.’ ” Humour was a technique we used with them.

**SW:** *You travelled in Africa in the time when apartheid was still very much alive. What was the relationship between WSCF leaders and the local SCM in South Africa and the leaders of apartheid, the people who stood for apartheid in South Africa?*

**PP:** Many leaders of the anti-apartheid movement were influenced by the ecumenical movement. The Student Christian Movement was a way of making people aware so that when apartheid came to an end, one would find people like those who were trained formally or informally by WSCF, to be the means of renewal today.

**SW:** *Could you tell us some important moments, some of your personal highlights in the ecumenical movement, in WCC and WSCF?*

**PP:** In WSCF, it was high life all the time. We did believe in challenging each other and also listening to each other and being willing to act with each other and that is the big genius of our Student Christian Movement, which all of us learnt. And one of the major things was Vatican II, because there were a lot of background contacts; several great scholars of the Roman Catholic Church used to come to Bossey. Some of them even came to the first assembly, which was actually forbidden, but they were dressed as press people.

By the time Pope Paul VI came along, it was a normal thing, doing things together, and the three popes with whom I had the chance to work practiced it. The Student Christian Movement played a very important role, because it was part of no particular tradition. We were all together, but it was informal, it was sharing, it was intellectually interesting and people took what they got and brought it to their churches.

**SW:** *What visions do you have about the future of WSCF? What suggestions or messages do you have for us as students?*

**PP:** I came back with my wife from Jamaica in 1990. We chose one of the parishes in Guttenberg and I retired. I lived in Germany through the nineties. One thing is very interesting: that so little theological work has been done in the nineties. In a way, after the Cold War people were fatigued – one must remember that the XX<sup>th</sup> century was no easy century, with two world wars, with serious confrontations, with the decolonisation.

The question for us was therefore how we are to have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, the worldly newspaper and God’s word? How do we renew ourselves in this situation? That is for me a major task, for all of us in our different ways in the Christian community. There is a sense of fatigue which has not been dissolved yet. It is that fatigue we have to face. And that is where you come in.

**Philip POTTER:**

**Touché dans notre entière condition:**

**Les vies et les moments de la FUACE**

Dans cette interview, Philip POTTER, une des plus grandes figures vivantes dans le mouvement œcuménique, revient avec Student World sur les moments de sa propre vie, de celle de plusieurs autres personnes qui sont responsables de la formation de la condition actuelle de l'œcuménisme; et il projette une vision et défi pour la génération émergente de jeunes gens qui sont entrain de prendre leur place dans la vie de la Fédération et de l'Eglise. POTTER a été actif avec la FUACE quatre décennies et demi. Commenant comme secrétaire d'étude dans le MEC du Jamaïque, devenant ensuite le Président de la Fédération entre 1960 et 1968, il rentre en Jamaïque dans les années 1980 pour enseigner et travailler une fois de plus avec le MEC. Durant sa carrière, il a vu se réaliser plusieurs événements considérés comme point de repère: l'intégration des étudiants de l'Eglise Catholique Romaine et Orthodoxe dans la Fédération, la naissance du Conseil Œcuménique de Eglises, la régionalisation de la Fédération et le commencement et la fin des tensions issues de la Guerre froide, entre l'Eglise et l'Etat dans les pays de l'Europe de l'Est Communiste. Suivant les défis du XXème siècle, POTTER voit le sens de la fatigue dans les insuffisances actuelles du travail théologique. Cela est pour lui le plus grand défi auquel fait face la FUACE aujourd'hui.

**Philip POTTER:**

**Tocados en nuestra totalidad: las vidas y tiempos de la FUMEC**

En esta entrevista, Philip POTTER, una de las más grandes figuras aún vivas del movimiento ecuménico, cuenta a Student World sobre su propia vida y la de muchas otras personas, que fueron responsables de la formación del actual ecumenismo, y al mismo tiempo plantea una visión y un reto a las nuevas generaciones, que recién ahora están tomando su lugar en la vida de la Federación y de la Iglesia. POTTER estuvo involucrado en el trabajo de la FUMEC por cuatro décadas y media. Comenzó como Secretario de Estudio en el MEC de Jamaica en 1944, y continuó hasta convertirse en Presidente de la Federación desde 1960 hasta 1968, antes de regresar a Jamaica en los ochenta para enseñar y trabajar con el MEC de allá una vez más. A lo largo de su carrera pudo ser testigo de varios hitos que tuvieron lugar: la integración de los estudiantes Ortodoxos y Romano Católicos en la Federación; el nacimiento del Consejo Mundial de Iglesias; la regionalización de la Federación; y el comienzo y fin de las tensiones entre la Iglesia y el Estado en la Europa Comunista del Este, debido a la Guerra Fría. Habiendo seguido de cerca los diversos retos del siglo XX, POTTER percibe la sensación de una evidente fatiga en el poco trabajo teológico que en el presente se hace, siendo este precisamente el mayor reto que enfrenta la FUMEC hoy.