

NAGYPÁL Szabolcs

# Has the Student Christian Movement a Future?

*Justice and peace in the world cannot be preserved without creative efforts that are on par with the dangers and challenges ahead of Church and society. To create and preserve reconciliation and – as a result – unity in the Church, an organised, vibrant and credible engine is needed – an engine which is in our centuries called the ecumenical movement. It is impossible to imagine this blessed movement without the first ecumenical organisation, the initiator and ferment, and many times the brain and soul of ecumenism, the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF).*

## I. Situation and Response

### 1. Crisis and Challenge

WSCF is a unique and peculiar organisation on the ecumenical and intellectual scene of the increasingly globalised world in many senses and in many fields. She is unique most of all in four aspects: in her ecumenical history and character, in her globally dialogical manner, in her solidarity with the oppressed and the poor, and in her engagement with spirituality and intellectuality at the same time.

We should not only preserve and safeguard these characteristic treasures, heritages and traditions of ours, but we need to bring them into full blossom and bloom in the twenty-first century. WSCF, like the ecumenical movement as a whole, is definitely at a turning point, where we are challenged to rethink and restructure most of our resources, our aims and goals, and our methods of functioning and work.

The ecumenical movement is currently suffering from the age-old tension between institution and charisma. The charismatic renewals in the Church and together with them the constant renewals of our charisma bring new blood to the institutions from time to time. In this respect, WSCF is responsible for the permanent freshness of the ecumenical movement. Apart from this, there is also a

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crisis of a financial nature in the ecumenical movement, and inside it, in the Student Christian Movement as well.

An important point of a paradigm shift always occurs when we start to understand and interpret the problems and stumbling blocks in our path as *challenges*. For those happy languages where this expression exists, it means 'a difficult, demanding, stimulating and inspiring task'; or 'an invitation or call to take part in a game.'

Similarly, the Chinese characters for "crisis" mean also "danger", "opportunity", and, ultimately, "challenge". It is our task now to understand and interpret these critical signs of our times as challenges, ie. invitations to take part in an inspiring game. This game, however, demands dozens of mountain-moving volunteers.

## 2. Identity, Mission and Vision

WSCF cannot afford a lack of vision in this situation, for three main reasons. First, the ecumenical movement is indeed in a time of trial and crisis, including our own organisation within it, the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Second, the history of our movement compels and enables us to play such a key role in the Church as we played in the late nineteenth century, as well as in the years between the two world wars.

Finally, we are students, women and men in our years of formation and education. And honestly when could we be braver and more daring to have a vision than now, in our university years, when basically the whole of life is ahead of us? There is an enormous critical but also nurturing potential dormant in the student world.

The most recent identity, mission and vision formulation of our movement was prepared in the Executive Committee (ExCo) meeting in New York in 2003, where the World Student Christian Federation summarised her commitment and vocation in the following statement:

"The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) is a global community of Student Christian Movements (SCMs) committed to dialogue, ecumenism, social justice and peace. Our mission is to empower students in critical thinking and constructive transformation of our world by being a space for: prayer and celebration; theological reflection; study and analysis of social and cultural processes; and solidarity and action across boundaries of culture, gender and ethnicity. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the WSCF is called to be a prophetic witness in Church and society. This vision is nurtured by a radical hope for God's Reign in history."<sup>1</sup>

This concise paragraph contains the greater part of what we shall now speak about in this paper. Vision encompasses not only a founding idea, but also necessarily the resolution to ensure its realisation. The key "holy" words in this respect are ecumenism, dialogue, discipleship (study) and solidarity. These are the four characteristic profiles which differentiate us from other similar organisations. These are also the prospects which can provide and open up an ever-brighter future for the Student Christian Movement.

(Bialystok, 2003). He is the editor-in-chief of *Mozaik* and *Student World*.

<sup>1</sup> *Identity, Vision and Mission of WSCF*. In *Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting Held in New York, USA, 26–30 October 2003*. 6.

## II. Four Key Concepts

### 1. Ecumenism: A Christian Spirituality

WSCF calls us to faith in God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – according to the Scriptures; and to discipleship within the life and mission of the Church. First, let us meditate on *ecumenism*: on the realisation and manifestation of the unity of the Church. This expression is not contained in our name, but the word *Christian* refers to it; this is what Christianity has meant in the Federation since the early times.

The ecumenical, interdenominational character of the Student Christian Movement needs to be permanently broadened, deepened and emphasised, in close cooperation with other Church bodies and similar global Christian student and youth movements and organisations.<sup>2</sup> The Universal Day of Prayer for Students (UDPS), which was first celebrated in 1898, making it the oldest ecumenical prayer tradition, is just one example of our determined role in ecumenical spirituality.

Ecumenism, contrary to what some might think, is not all about grey. We know from physics that white light contains all the colours of the rainbow, and if at least one is missing, it is impossible to perceive the pure white light again. Furthermore, white as a colour is only visible if it can contain all the colours of the rainbow. The ecumenical movement is the prism which gathers the white light spectrum (the rainbow) to receive the beam of white light again – a beam which was refracted by the repeated divisions in Church history.

To share our spiritual treasures, to bring these spiritual riches into our common life, will be of mutual benefit to WSCF herself, to all the denominations and to all these ecumenical organisations. Through this, WSCF should gain back her role as a space of formation for future ecumenical leaders, and as an ecumenical laboratory for daring new ideas and paradigms.

We grow in Christian life through prayer, study of the Bible and participation in the worship and witness of the Church. In 1895, the founding vision of the Nobel-prize winner John R. MOTT, the first general secretary of WSCF was such: “There has been no more hopeful development towards the real spiritual union of Christendom than the WSCF, which unites in common purpose and work the coming leaders of Church and state in all lands.”<sup>3</sup>

The words of Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III, which he uttered in 1911 in Constantinople when the Orthodox branch of Christianity joined the Protestant-based Student Christian Movement, echo MOTT’s evaluation and give us encouragement in our endeavour: “Your work is apostolic. It has the blessing of God, because a conference to draw Christians into fellowship and cooperation is one of the most sacred causes.”<sup>4</sup>

It is the responsibility of the whole Federation to strengthen the connection with the denominational bodies and ecumenical organisations at all levels, from the global to the local. Our members represent the Federation in this wider scene, in the context of the ecumenical world. They enliven, sustain and strength-

<sup>2</sup> The most important siblings to mention in this respect are *Syndesmos* (The World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth), *JECI-MIEC* (International Young Catholic Students – International Movement of Catholic Students), *YWCA-YMCA* (Young Women’s Christian Association and Young Men’s Christian Association) and also *IFES* (International Fellowship of Evangelical Students).

<sup>3</sup> POTTER Philip – WIESER Thomas, *Seeking and Serving the Truth. The First Hundred Years of the World Student Christian Federation*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 34.

en contacts most of all with our sister organisations, but also with other actors of the Church life. We must build friendships and partnerships throughout the Christian world, to build nets of mutual trust. The ecumenical movement has always been a movement of friendships and appreciations.

“WSCF is a working model for the global Christian community: as we discover and assert our common faith; as we commit ourselves to a common mission; and as we engage in common ethical action”<sup>5</sup> – such was the assertion in 1929 of Francis P. MILLER, the chairperson of the Federation. Indeed, WSCF proved to be most fertile and proliferous, having many daughter organisations as well. The Student Christian Movement has become a huge and beautiful tree in the course of history, and many fruits have ripened in its crown.

This is the spiritual background which compels us to move forward and to re-enact the mentality of our foremothers and forefathers, leaving behind our prejudice and pride. The *kenosis* (self-emptying) of Christ is the eternal model for dialogue in all communities. Kenosis means powerlessness, continual purification from self-centredness, growing in openness. Prayer links one with the goodness and power of God, while sacrifice strengthens prayer and promotes communion. In the process of kenosis, self-sacrifice unites prayer and sacrifice, when one becomes prayer-for-others.

## 2. Dialogue: Global Dynamism and Communion

The second watchword for the Federation in the twenty-first century, as well as in the third millennium, is *dialogue*. Nor is this expression contained in our name(s), but there are three references to it: world (in the sense of global), movement (emphasising dynamism) and federation (or, theologically, communion).

### A. Global, Regional and Subregional

The Student Christian Movement is unique in the Church scene, too, as far as her *global* character is concerned. WSCF is present on all continents of the globe, organised in six regions (Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East and North America) and – inside these – several subregions.

At the grassroots level, in the subregional and regional committees, and through their representation in the ExCo, the six regions constantly seek to ensure that WSCF focuses on meaningful and forward-looking programmes and constructive visions for the future of the Federation. Also, focused thematic co-operation takes place on a global level, in an inter-regional working environment.

Since WSCF is a federation of national movements, the regions, while fully taking part in the life and work of the global federation, are autonomous in the majority of their own decision-making and programmes. This *autonomy* guarantees the particular profiles of the regions and enables them to contribute to the reconciled diversity of the Student Christian Movement. Simultaneously, since we are one worldwide Federation, developments in the various regions and subregions remain part of the concerns of the entire Federation.

The most effective ways of movement building are definitely the regional and subregional events. The regions, on the other hand, are bound together in internships fostering interregional co-operation,<sup>6</sup> and through mutual invitations to conferences. The multi-level web of the Federation is thus structured, woven and enhanced.

All cooperation is a learning process, and WSCF is a rare realm where intercultural, interdenominational and even interreligious experiences can be obtained, deepened and internalised. In meeting each other, we create an opportunity to water one another's plants and brighten each other's colours, to delight and feast God's eyes.

## B. Dynamism and Consensus

The interregional leadership of the Student Christian Movement is most of all the *Executive Committee* (ExCo). Preferably, meetings of the ExCo are held in conjunction with larger subregional or regional conferences, seminars and gatherings. Such meetings involve the ExCo in the life of the regions and inspire greater regional involvement in WSCF. These events involve as many WSCF members from the host region as possible, giving a global dimension to their thematic and programmatic work and their leadership training.

The working methods of the Executive Committee and the regional and subregional committees are constantly updated and restructured, following the technical advances of the age. Fervent discussions regularly take place via email among the members of these committees, and most decision-making happens via email in-between the meetings. In this respect, the spread of the Internet has been bringing *dynamism* to the worldwide web of the Federation.

It is possible to keep a balance between effectiveness and full consensus in the processes of decision-making. The concept of *consensus* as being worked out in the Federation is one of our main contributions to the ecumenical movement, to the decision-making processes in the Church, and also in other human communities which try to keep and inspire the commitment and enthusiasm of their members.

The global Executive Committee, at the same time, is one of the most effective means of interregional leadership training and ecumenical formation in the whole ecumenical world. Therefore, a highly important aspect is that the spirit of the ExCo members are kept high during their whole term of service, or – better – further suscited. The former SCMers will be salt and ferment, when taking responsibilities in the ecumenical movement.

## C. Communion and Synthesis

The Federation has a pioneering heritage also in the partnership of all people, of women and men, in integrating the full potential of humanity for co-operation, co-existence and convivence. WSCF brings us into fellowship with one another in mutual service and supports efforts to serve all people in their needs.

WSCF was the first international organization in which women and men related to each other on a basis of formal equality. Henriette BODAERT, the wife and

<sup>6</sup> Especially along the lines of the *Frontier Internship in Mission* (FIM) and the Deborah Project.

companion of Willem VISSER'T HOOFT, the first general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), said: "It takes two genders to build the world."<sup>7</sup>

WSCF is an inclusive community which respects the reality of pluralism, and in which all students and (senior) friends can collaborate and make their contribution on a basis of equality, mutual respect and Christian fellowship. As witnesses for the coming and realisation of God's Reign, we build community and *communion* with each other – through the means of dialogue.

In dialogue, we are dependent on listening: listening well, again, and better. "The great spiritual unity, which WSCF created, has been an illustration of what the Church must become for all Her members" – William TEMPLE, later archbishop of Canterbury, remarked in 1915.<sup>8</sup>

As servants and messengers, we extend the Reign of God among all people in order that the very life of Jesus Christ may through us permeate the whole fabric and web of our social and civic life. It was William TEMPLE on the same occasion who summarised: "We want Christian ideals to permeate our whole life; Christian principles to be carried to their last consequences; nothing and no one shall stand in our way; we want to live a full realization of our faith."

Informed spiritual and theological dialogue is conducted in a committed way within all segments of the Church of Jesus Christ. Similarly, dialogue takes place also with our fellow pilgrims of other faiths. And, ultimately, dialogue is our attitude towards all people of goodwill and openness to the transcendent.

Dialogue itself takes many forms at these levels, sometimes aimed at approaching the truth, sometimes at building community through reconciliation. We are sent to mission, and our mission now is dialogue. Also the spirituality of discipleship needs our humility and eagerness to learn when encountering systems, findings and points of reference other than our own.

Inside the Federation, similarly, our dialogical responsibilities demand openness, willingness and commitment to learn, to listen and to consider the ideas, problems and aspirations of the member movements, subregions and regions, trying to *synthesise* and bring them into dialogue. We play an inspirational and susciting role where need emerges, while letting each other design, develop and renew our community profiles.

In representing, moderating, caring and synthesising, we, in many ways, give face to the Federation. Being committed to the agreed aims of the Federation, it is a privilege and honour for us from the local to the global level to lend our face and our energies for the advancement of our common cause.

### 3. Solidarity and Pro-Existence

There is the famous slogan in the Student Christian Movement that we have the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. As faithful disciples, we examine the questions of our social and political life, praying that God may give us guidance in the emphases of the Holy Bible, arriving to us in our interpretative communities.

WSCF is a space where our faith and socio-political commitment can interact and face one another. We are called to discover the implications of Christian obedience

7 Ibid. 117. / 8 Ibid. 52.

for every walk of life. “The Bible is food for wrestlers, but the need for this food is not recognized, unless one is actively engaged in the struggle of the Christian life”<sup>9</sup> – acknowledged Daniel Thambyrajah NILES in 1955, the first Asian chairperson of the Federation and a mastermind of the ecumenical movement.

Dialogue, broadly understood, incorporates not only many of our common spiritual and intellectual endeavours, but also the dialogue of life, which is the work for peace, *solidarity* and social justice. Dialogue of life means doing everything together that conscience does not oblige us to do separately.

The Christian presence in society entails also our involvement, engagement, responsibility in and for the world, striving for peace and justice in and among communities. As Hans C. HOEKENDIJK, a Dutch missiologist and SCMer emphasised in 1948: “The gospel is not good advice, but good news.”<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, it is a spiritual necessity to resist every totalitarian and idolatrous influence on us, in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, knowing that the community of Jesus Christ is essentially stronger than the most powerful divisive forces, which try to drive people and communities apart. God’s eternal questions to the prodigal human soul are: “Where are you?” and “Whom do you say that I am?”

We prepare the way for unity by the practice of love; and we are well aware that such obedience to God’s will involves struggle and co-suffering. The ecumenical heart feels and actually enters into sympathy and compassion with the aspirations and struggles of other peoples and communities, *inpro-existence* – a life for others.

#### 4. Culture and Discipleship

We have a strong vocation, finally, which comes from the student, intellectual and academic character of the Federation. The proper function of the university or any institution of higher learning is scientific research for truth, the engagement in intellectual discourse, and the maintenance of culture. The university is a free community of students and teachers who live by and for the truth.

In line with this, the Student Christian Movement, witnessing to Jesus Christ in the academic community, has never ceased to create and radiate an intellectual and spiritual milieu. Starting from small local groups and through national Student Christian Movements, we try to understand, analyse and interpret society, culture, arts and science, in the attitude of authentic Christian *discipleship*.

We train and nurture our members to become academically advanced as students, theologically equipped as Christians, and ecumenically oriented as church-related persons. To fulfil this, WSCF carries out a wide range of programmes based on assessed needs of member movements and the current social and cultural realities.

We experiment with syntheses for the mutual enrichment and constructive transformation of our fields of scientific, social and cultural interest. In these, we aim to be not only informed and educated as much as needed and possible, but also daring, prophetic and visionary, though always in a balanced and harmonious way.

Already we have mentioned the picture of the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. There is something important, though, which should be added to this metaphor and emphasised. It is of primary importance that *we also carry a rucksack full of books on our back*. There can and should be fervent discussions on which books we have in mind exactly, but these may be just details: the important thing is that we – as students – are to be surrounded by books.

On one hand, books inform us about the creation process and the interpretive history of the Bible (so, about the Tradition of the Church). On the other hand, books provide background and orient us when reading the daily, weekly or monthly newspapers. Without this background knowledge, news does not find its proper context and remains alienated from our web of education, impossible to interpret and approach.

These three textual strongholds – the Bible pulpit, the library of *culture* and the newspaper stand – ensure the fullness and integrity of a Christian disciple in mind, spirit and body. “The Christian is simply a person, who is in the process of being restored to normal humanhood”<sup>11</sup> – said Hans C. HOEKENDIJK.

But it is not only the input of books (reading them), but the output as well (producing them), which is our concern. A communion of educated and demanding discipleship is light without serious periodicals. WSCF *publications* are of crucial importance, in order that our wisdom and challenges be shared with future generations and people far away from our contexts, and to develop a common language for discourse among all students.

Publications must be promoted, as they are fora of dialogue, spiritual and intellectual exchange for the global Federation, in regions and subregions, in national and local SCMs. They are also means of raising awareness of WSCF to partners and sister organisations.

A thorough plan, programme and project must be developed for publications in the Federation, at the local, national, subregional, regional and global levels, to maintain and refresh the memory of the student world. Towards this end, the ecumenical review *Student World* (established in 1908) shall be continually published, to ensure that our voices are heard by each other and by the world. By enlivening the mutual exchange of these contributions, we create a web of texts and concerns.

### III. Subtle as Serpents, Gentle as Doves

We have summarised a hopeful future for the Student Christian Movement, earmarked by the key words of ecumenism, dialogue, solidarity and discipleship. A guiding verse for our whole endeavour is Matthew 10,16: “Listen! I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. You must be subtle as serpents and gentle as doves.”

It is not only the paradoxical nature of this command that makes it challenging to discern its true meaning: it is also the ambiguous nature of the words. Consulting different translations of this verse, one can find nearly as many variations on the wording. Particularly the first adjective is uncertain: *wise, shrewd, crafty, cunning,*

11 Ibid. 206.

*subtle, astute* – although similar in meaning, each word carries slightly different connotations, which upon consideration can change the whole tenor of the verse.

“Subtle” is a rich solution, because it can equally well be read as positive or negative, good or evil. It has a sense of refinement, a characterisation of being both tricky and difficult to trick. For similar reasons, “gentle” might be more appropriate than “innocent” for the doves.

The distinction is important: innocence has connotations of not-knowing, directly contradicting the previous phrase commanding awareness; but gentleness implies more of a measured and deliberate state – a conscious choice of the way of love, in full knowledge and understanding of all what this choice entails.

Thus read, the verse neatly sums up the mission of the Student Christian Movement: as students, we are to comprehend as deeply and fully as possible the true nature of the world in which we live; but as Christians we must not boldly accept this nature, but rather we must renew the world with a redeeming and reconciling love.

In line with this, we may aim to be a relevant and dissenting minority with dignified anger, but at the same time a movement of participation, standing in the Biblical prophetic tradition. We can pray with the words of the Nobel-prize winner Lutheran Archbishop, Nathan SÖDERBLOM: “Lord, give me humility and wisdom to serve the great cause of the free unity of Thy Church.”<sup>12</sup> In that way we become prophets who constantly proclaim the unity of the Church in this generation; in order to see the radiating light again, not just the rainbow.

Jean MONNIER said in 1895: “The work amongst students has the world in its hands.”<sup>13</sup> Keeping this in our mind, therefore, the mentality and spirituality of *escaping forward* is suggested in these times of crisis and challenge, which would mean a constantly renewed engagement in creative projects and programmes that aim to reach an ever-broader constituency, in terms of students, partners, donors and communities.

Together, the oldest ecumenical organisation and the first ecumenical review both should serve the cause guided by the Holy Spirit: that soon we all may be one, through ecumenism, dialogue, solidarity and discipleship. Therefore our mastering conviction is, too, that with the help of God, our best days – incomparably the best – are certainly ahead of us. Let us again arise to life in abundance.

#### Suggested Reading

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**NAGYPÁL Szabolcs:**

### **Le Mouvement d'Étudiant Chrétien a-t-il un avenir?**

Plus de cent années après sa fondation, le Mouvement d'Étudiant Chrétien doit répondre aujourd'hui à la question de savoir s'il a un avenir comme partie intégrante du mouvement œcuménique et de l'Église Chrétienne. Dans cette situation défi, la mentalité et la spiritualité du *saut en avant* signifie un engagement renouvelé, dans des programmes et projets créatifs qui auront pour but d'atteindre une structure à jamais légère. La Fédération a un héritage d'être pionnière dans l'intégration de tout le potentiel de l'humanité pour la réconciliation. La FUACE doit regagner son rôle comme espace de formation pour les futurs responsables du mouvement œcuménique, et comme un laboratoire pour l'élaboration de nouvelles idées et nouveaux paradigmes. Nous devons aussi nous réengager pour les publications, pour qu'ainsi nous puissions partager nos sagesses et défis avec les générations futures et les personnes vivant loin de nos contextes. Et le plus de tout: c'est notre vocation d'être des prophètes qui proclament constamment l'unité de l'Église dans cette génération.

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### **Has the Student Christian Movement a Future?**

More than a hundred years after her foundation, the Student Christian Movement has to face the question of whether it has a future as a part of the ecumenical movement and the Christian Church. In this situation of challenge, the mentality and spirituality of *escaping forward* means a renewed engagement in creative projects and programmes that aim to reach an ever-broader constituency. The Federation has a pioneering heritage in integrating the full potential of humanity for reconciliation. WSCF must gain back her role as a space of formation for future ecumenical leaders, and as a laboratory for daring new ideas and paradigms. We must also recommit ourselves to publications, so that our wisdom and challenges can be shared with future generations and people far away from our contexts. Through the dynamism of the Holy Spirit, we must cooperate in building our part of God's Reign, being engaged in an informed and committed dialogue with the world around us. And most of all: it is our vocation to be prophets who constantly proclaim the unity of the Church in this generation.