

# THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSFORMATION



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## An Ecumenical Journey

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Konrad Raiser

*Translated by Stephen G. Brown*



World Council  
of Churches  
Publications

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Konrad Raiser. Translated by Stephen G. Brown

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# PREFACE

Ten years after having retired as general secretary of the World Council of Churches, I wrote an account of my experiences during more than three decades in the service of the ecumenical movement. I deliberately prepared this account in my native German language in order to share this personal harvest with colleagues and friends back home. I also wanted, at least indirectly, to report back to my church and to my university, which had granted me leave for my responsibilities in the WCC. These fairly extensive “memoirs” were published under the title *Ökumene unterwegs zwischen Kirche und Welt. Erinnerungsbericht über dreißig Jahre im Dienst der ökumenischen Bewegung* (Münster: LIT-Verlag, 2013).

While writing these memoirs I continued to reflect on ways to make the account available in English to the wider audience of ecumenical workers, former colleagues, and friends, as well as to those who carry responsibility in and for the ecumenical movement today. Therefore I am extremely grateful to Stephen Brown for offering not simply to translate the German book but to recompose the material for an English-language audience. We had already worked together successfully in preparing the English version of my earlier book on *Religion – Power – Politics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). I am equally grateful to Michael West of WCC Publications for encouraging the preparation of this English version and for seeing it through to publication.

My account covers the period from 1969 to 2003, from when I arrived as a WCC staff member at the age of 31 to the end of my mandate as general secretary. During these more than three decades, the WCC and the ecumenical movement have experienced profound changes and transformations. The third volume of *A History of the Ecumenical Movement* (ed. John Briggs et al. [Geneva: WCC Publications, 2004]) provides carefully prepared overall surveys of significant and ecumenically relevant developments during the period from 1968 to the turn of the millennium. Understandably, the volume refers to developments in the WCC only in this wider context. Since I have been

deeply involved in the activities of the WCC during this very period, I felt a certain responsibility to complement the “official” historical assessment with a narrative account from an inside perspective, all the more since none of my predecessors, with the exception of Dr Visser ’t Hooft, have been able to write their memoirs.

The present book does not claim to provide a comprehensive institutional history of the WCC since the Uppsala assembly. I have limited myself in this account to those activities and developments in which I was personally involved or for which I carried responsibility. Apart from the official minutes of the governing bodies of the WCC, I have used my personal notebooks but refrained from consulting correspondence or other unpublished materials in the archives of the WCC. At the same time, I have also abstained from turning the text into a proper “memoir”; references to my personal story have been included only to the extent that they are relevant for interpreting my involvement in the life of the WCC.

I dedicate this book to the memory of Philip Potter (1921–2015), who for me has been the most important companion on the ecumenical journey.

*Berlin August 2017*

*Konrad Raiser*

# AN ECUMENICAL APPRENTICE

## My background in Germany

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When I finished my theological studies in early 1963 at the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Tübingen, there was no indication that the ecumenical movement might become the focal point of my future service in the church. The only exposure to ecumenical concerns during my university studies was a seminar with Hans Küng, who had just published his early book, *The Council and Reunion* (1960).

I spent the first year of my subsequent pre-ordination training as part of the team on urban and industrial mission in Berlin. The experience of accompanying young workers from some of the big plants in the electrical and machine industry in Berlin strengthened my interest in issues of church and society, and I planned to make this the focus of future work in church and theology. After completing ministerial training with ordination in the Protestant regional church of Württemberg, a generous scholarship enabled me to spend the year 1965/66 at the Graduate School of Arts and Science at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, concentrating on general sociology (T. Parsons), sociology of religion (R. Bellah), social psychology (E. Erikson) and social anthropology (A. Inkeles).

During the year at Harvard I discovered the social philosophy of William James and George Herbert Mead. This prompted me to choose Mead's theory of interaction as the focus of research for my doctoral dissertation with a special emphasis on its possible implications for a theological anthropology. On returning to Germany I took up a position as research and teaching assistant at the faculty in Tübingen while at the same time working on my dissertation.<sup>1</sup> In March 1967 I also married Elisabeth von Weizsäcker. She had just finished her training as a teacher for history and French and was preparing a doctorate in history. In December 1967 our first son, Martin, was born.

Having both reached the end of our postgraduate education, we looked for an opportunity to widen our horizons and gain additional experience by spending some years in a different social and cultural environment before settling down more permanently at home. We contemplated the possibility of working for a time in Latin America, in Ecuador or Brazil. Neither of these options could be realized, partly because of reservations on the part of my church. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised when I was asked whether I wanted to be considered as a candidate for a staff position at the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva. I had become aware of the WCC and its activities through my father, who had been a delegate at the Geneva conference on church and society in 1966 as well as at the Uppsala assembly in 1968. Reading documents from these conferences and learning about the WCC's programmatic orientations for the post-assembly period had in fact kindled my interest in getting to know the work of the WCC better. That an opportunity for this should arise so soon came as a surprise.

The staff position in question was to assist the director of the secretariat on Faith and Order, Dr Lukas Vischer, since he was taking on new responsibilities with the beginning of official relationships between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) had offered the WCC an extra position that was financed as a German pastorate abroad. The first incumbent, Reinhard Groscurth, was about to return to Germany after three years, and the WCC was looking for a successor. Together with two other candidates, I was invited for an interview in Geneva. I didn't have any special qualifications for work in the area of Faith and Order and was sceptical about my chances. I was all the more excited when I was appointed to the post by the WCC executive committee in February 1969, once the EKD had given its approval. The following month, while staying with my wife and our small son, Martin, in our family chalet in Valais in Switzerland finishing work on my dissertation, we travelled to Geneva for a day of preliminary discussions with my future director, Lukas Vischer. As he described the main priorities of the work of the secretariat for Faith and Order, I realized just how much I still had to learn about the churches and the ecumenical movement. I found out later that my name had been suggested to Lukas Vischer by Ernst Lange, whom I had met during my year in Berlin, and who had meanwhile become director of the Division of Ecumenical Action and associate general secretary of the WCC in Geneva.

## Joining the staff of the WCC

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I joined the staff in Geneva at a time of change and optimism about the future following the WCC's 4rth Assembly in Uppsala in 1968. The assembly had led to a major expansion of the council's programmatic work. A new Office for Education had been set up to continue the work of the World Council for Christian Education after its projected integration with the WCC in 1972. The Uppsala assembly also played a pivotal role in the creation of new areas of work such as worldwide development, dialogue with people of other faiths, and the Programme to Combat Racism. Even traditional areas of work like International Affairs, World Mission and Evangelism, Church and Society, the Participation of Women and Men in Church and Society, and, not least, Faith and Order received a new direction.

There had also been a change in the leadership of the council the year before the assembly. Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, the first general secretary and to all intents and purposes the architect of the WCC, retired after 20 extremely successful years. He was succeeded by Eugene Carson Blake, a Presbyterian church leader from the United States with many years of ecumenical involvement, and experience in the management of complex church organizations as the "stated clerk" (or general secretary) of his denomination, president of the US National Council of Churches, and moderator of the WCC finance committee. He had also played a prominent role in the civil rights movement in the United States and was determined to mobilize the churches within the fellowship of the WCC in the struggle against racial discrimination and for the respect of human and civil rights. He was reaching the end of his career and had accepted the post of general secretary only for a five-year term. In contrast to his predecessor and his successor, I hardly got to know him better. It was only much later that I realized his significance and the major influence he had on the development of the ecumenical movement.

This was a period when the ecumenical movement had developed a new dynamic, reinforced by the social changes of the time, demanding a readiness from the churches to renew themselves to face these new challenges. Another important reason for this general feeling that we were at the start of a new era was the increased contact with the Roman Catholic Church and especially the Vatican. The setting up of the secretariats for Christian unity, for justice and peace, and for the laity following the Second Vatican Council meant there were now direct partners for ecumenical cooperation. A Joint Working Group, with an equal number of members from both sides, had, in an astonishingly

short space of time, laid the foundations for continuing cooperation between the staff of the Vatican and the WCC. One important fruit of this activity was the creation of the joint Committee for Society, Development and Peace (SODEPAX), which even had a jointly staffed office in Geneva. Pope Paul VI honoured the council with a visit in June 1969. At the same time a special commission of the Joint Working Group had begun to study the theological, ecclesiological, and practical implications of the Catholic Church's potential membership in the WCC.

Even before beginning work in Geneva, I was invited to attend the first meetings of the governing bodies of the WCC following the Uppsala assembly. These took place in August 1969 on the campus of the University of Kent at Canterbury. Prior to the meeting of the central committee, there were meetings of the newly appointed commissions and working groups of the various departments. At the time, the Faith and Order Commission, made up of 135 members, would normally meet once every three years for a plenary meeting. In between these meetings, a working committee of 25 members would meet annually. The commission had something of a special status within the WCC since its members included representatives of churches that did not belong to the council, particularly the Roman Catholic Church, which after the Uppsala assembly had agreed to appoint nine representatives to the commission, one of which would also serve on the working committee. The first Catholic members of the commission included Joseph Ratzinger, then a professor at Tübingen who would later become Pope Benedict XVI. I have only a vague recollection of the meeting of the working committee in Canterbury. The names, faces, and issues were all new to me. The only discussion that I still remember, and it was certainly an important one, was about the study project being planned on the theme "Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind." This was intended to expand the commission's perspective from dealing with issues of church unity in a traditional sense to include the challenges with which churches were confronted in the secular world.

At the Uppsala assembly, the report of Section I on "The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church," based on preparatory work by the Faith and Order Commission, referred to the church as being "bold" to speak of itself as "the sign of the coming unity of mankind."<sup>2</sup> This served as the basis for the study document presented to the working committee in Canterbury. I was fascinated by the broad and wide-ranging scope of this text, and eagerly looked forward to my participation in working on this study. The intense discussions in the working committee brought me down to earth, however, since it soon

became clear that the majority of the committee's members continued to be critical of the idea of expanding the discussion on unity to include issues being raised within human society.

I attended only the first few days of the meeting of the central committee that followed. The meeting has gone down in church and ecumenical history for its decision to create a Programme to Combat Racism and its related Special Fund, as well as its discussions on creating an ecumenical programme for global development. Only much later did I realize just how momentous these decisions had been. In his report to the central committee, Lukas Vischer referred to another part of the report of Section I of the Uppsala assembly, which referred to the time "when a genuinely universal council may once more speak for all Christians, and lead the way into the future."<sup>3</sup> There was an unexpectedly positive response to this address, and one that echoed far beyond the WCC. The ecumenical discussion on councils and conciliarity which it initiated would become a major part of my work in the secretariat in the years that followed.

## **A staff member in Faith and Order**

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On 1 October 1969, I officially started work at the WCC. Lukas Vischer suggested straight away that I should read as much as possible in the first six months to get to know the work of the commission, since later it would get more and more difficult to find the time for concentrated study and research. I was only too happy to follow this advice since during these first few months I also had to prepare for the oral examination for my doctorate in Tübingen. Lukas Vischer soon offered me a specific objective. August 1970 would mark the 50th anniversary of the first meeting in Geneva of representatives of more than 80 churches to prepare for a possible World Conference on Faith and Order. He suggested that I review the work of Faith and Order to prepare some articles for this anniversary for the church press in Germany and possibly beyond. I should not deal only with the history of Faith and Order but also offer an evaluation of the current situation following the increasing ecumenical receptiveness of the Roman Catholic Church and the new directions for the work of the commission looking toward its next plenary meeting in 1971.

Re-reading my papers from that time, I am struck by how much of a real feeling there was after Uppsala that we were at a turning point in the history of the ecumenical movement. The traditional work of Faith and Order, which

had been aimed at patient efforts to overcome confessional differences, seemed to be declining in importance. Some people were even speaking of a “crisis” of ecumenism. On the other hand, churches found themselves confronted by new tensions and challenges that required responses transcending the confessional traditions, and the traditional efforts to promote the “unity of the church” were being challenged, especially from Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In the secretariat on Faith and Order, my immediate colleagues – apart from the director, Lukas Vischer – comprised three study secretaries and three administrative assistants. The study secretaries included two Orthodox theologians. Fr Vitaly Borovoy of the Russian Orthodox Church had been granted a leave of absence as professor of church history at the theological academy in Leningrad. John Zizioulas, at the time a lay theologian from Greece, belonged to the Ecumenical Patriarchate and today plays a central role as a metropolitan in the patriarchate’s ecumenical relationships. The third study secretary was Gerald Moede, a Methodist theologian from the United States. I was not only the youngest in the team, but also much junior to my colleagues as far as my ecumenical and theological experience and competence was concerned. The indisputable head of the team was Lukas Vischer, who came originally from Basel. He had been appointed in 1961 as a research secretary in Faith and Order and had represented the WCC as an observer at the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965. In 1966 he became director of the secretariat and, until he left the WCC in 1979, was one of its most influential personalities. He had a collegial style but a firm hand and dictated the rhythm of the work with his intellectual force and single-mindedness.

At the Ecumenical Centre, the secretariat for Faith and Order was placed at the end of a long corridor that also included the offices of the Commission for International Affairs, for Church and Society, and Dialogue with People of Other Faiths, as well as the office for the newly appointed coordinator of the “Humanum Studies,” David Jenkins. He had been a lecturer at Oxford, where he was known as an expert on patristics, as well as being a member of the Faith and Order Commission. Even in those days we worked with our office doors open, so we were able to get to know each other quite quickly. Each morning at ten, a trolley would arrive with coffee and croissants. On hearing the trolley bell, the various colleagues would emerge from their offices to get their coffee. I recall the long conversations we would sometimes have on the way back to our offices, especially those with David Jenkins, where occasionally I ended up with my back literally to the wall.

I was helped to feel more at home in what was still quite an unfamiliar environment thanks to an initiative by the Dutch communications director, Albert van den Heuvel. He persuaded Willem A. Visser 't Hooft, who had retired a few years earlier as general secretary and had begun to start writing his memoirs, to offer a sort of private seminar on the history of the ecumenical movement for the recently arrived staff members. Every three to four weeks, a group of about 10 to 15 staff would gather at his home where he would offer us a closer insight into the chapter that he was working on. There was a fixed ritual for these evening gatherings. We would be let in at 8 p.m. precisely and offered a cup of coffee. Then would come the introduction by Visser 't Hooft. He would already have announced the subject at the end of the previous gathering so that participants could undertake the preparation that was expected of them. At 9 p.m. a glass of white wine would be offered, and we would then begin to discuss what we had just heard and have the chance to pose all kinds of questions. Shortly before 10 p.m. Visser 't Hooft would be asked to inform us of the subject for the next gathering, and at 10 p.m. on the dot we would be let out of the house. I always considered it to have been a special privilege to be introduced to the history and background of the ecumenical movement by someone who had played such a significant role in it. The discussions at the home of Visser 't Hooft not only inspired me to continue my own research, but gave me an awareness at a very early stage of how things fit together, an knowledge that I would not have received so easily from the written records.

## Initial ecumenical reflections

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In March 1970 I was sent to a consultation organized by the Strasbourg Institute for Ecumenical Research at the Liebfrauenberg in Alsace. Some of the theses that I prepared for that meeting show the results of my first studies on the history and future tasks of Faith and Order:

First, the unity of the church today is prevented much less by differences in organization, doctrine, and sacramental and liturgical life than it is through the fundamental barriers to the fulfilment of human community: race, class, educational achievement, power.

Second, ecumenism as a movement aiming at the unity of the church is likely to have a future only if the unity of humankind is seen as being at the theological heart of the problem of unity. This has consequences for the practice and life of the church.

And third, the unity of the church as a genuine human community will not be achieved according to the principles of the established churches. The future of ecumenism, and thus the future of the church, depends on whether the churches are able to accept fellowship on the basis of the principles of those who up to now have been excluded.

One of the issues we were dealing with in the secretariat was that of conciliarity, specifically the significance of the conciliar approach of the early church for the contemporary ecumenical movement. I referred already to Lukas Vischer's report to the Canterbury meeting about the vision of a "genuinely universal council." In a situation of renewed discussions about the future direction of the ecumenical movement, this idea met an unexpectedly strong and positive response and appeared to offer a clear direction for efforts to define more clearly the aim of the unity of the church.

As a young member of staff in the secretariat I was drawn into this fascinating discussion about the future of the ecumenical movement, and Lukas Vischer encouraged me to take part in the further elaboration of this objective in several lectures and articles. I was invited by the German monthly *Evangelische Kommentare* to provide reports as an external collaborator on developments in the ecumenical movement. I began what turned out to be a stimulating activity in June 1971 with an article entitled, "For the Whole of Humanity: A Universal Council as a Model for the Ecumenical Movement."<sup>4</sup> After the Faith and Order Commission meeting in Louvain in 1971, I was invited by the leading German journal on Protestant ethics, the *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik*, to offer an interpretation of what conciliarity meant for the future of the ecumenical movement. The article that resulted, "Conciliarity: The Discipline of the Fellowship,"<sup>5</sup> together with my piece in the *Evangelische Kommentare* represent the first contributions I made in my own right to ecumenical debate.

I have already referred to my discussions with David Jenkins, the coordinator of the Humanum Studies, on the way back to my office from the mid-morning coffee trolley. With my own interest in theological anthropology (the subject of my doctoral research), I was eager to know more about his attempt to study what it means to be human from the perspective of Christian faith. The discussions with David Jenkins were both challenging and frustrating. I admired his theological scholarship but had great difficulty in following his train of thought and how he expressed it. I became aware, perhaps for the first time, just how much my understanding of theology, forged in the German academic tradition, differed from the Anglican theological tradition, from

which he came. The more I studied the various documents that David Jenkins had drawn up, however, the more I began to appreciate how far-reaching his insights and observations actually were. I discovered many parallels to the discussions taking place in the Commission on Faith and Order, and especially about the main theme of the Louvain meeting, “Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind.” Therefore I gladly accepted David Jenkins’ invitation to join a small advisory group for the Humanum Studies, which offered me an opportunity for very creative theological exchanges.

One of David Jenkins’ important decisions right at the beginning of his work was to ward off the idea that it would focus on developing fundamental elements of a Christian anthropology.<sup>6</sup> As far as he was concerned, the starting point was not so much “*What* is the human being” or “*What* does it mean to live as a human being” – questions that would lead to drawing up a universally applicable definition – but rather, “*How* can we live today in a human way” or “*How* can the Christian faith help a genuinely human life?” Thus the study shifted to the question, “What resources do men and women have, and what resources might they have, for living hopefully and reactively with the questions which their life in the world puts to their humanity?”<sup>7</sup> At the same time, this was linked to the attempt to develop a theological interpretation that sought to discern how the tradition of the Christian faith could be articulated in such a way that it could be seen as a source of hope and encouragement to fulfilled humanity.

The observation that contemporary experience diverges from the Christian answers to the issue of human existence led to a renewed shift of focus to the question of how we can undertake theology today so that it becomes a help to a genuinely human life. Theology, concluded Jenkins, makes possible a practice of “transcendence in the midst of human life,”<sup>8</sup> with its conflicts and unresolved issues. In radically taking seriously faith in the incarnation, we recognize that the more we penetrate the reality of the world, the nearer we approach the transcendent reality of God. Incarnation, cross, and resurrection are therefore signs of the possibility of a full humanity, especially given human suffering in situations of injustice and oppression and in the face of the reality of evil. If theology is to fulfil these expectations, then there is a further question, namely, “How does human community need to be structured in order that such a theology is produced?” This question led to the third phase of the study, which Jenkins described as “practical ecclesiology” and which demonstrated a striking resemblance to the conclusions of the study on the “Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind.” Unfortunately, the insights of the Humanum Studies were lost sight of far too quickly.

Alongside such endeavours and the beginning of preparations for the meeting of the Faith and Order Commission at Louvain in 1971, I was immediately drawn into the ongoing tasks of the secretariat. These included being responsible for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Since the Second Vatican Council, the preparatory material had been prepared by a working group appointed by Faith and Order for the WCC, and the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. This was my first experience of working with Catholic partners. Another task was to prepare a new edition of the ecumenical hymn book, *Cantate Domino* (originally produced by the World Student Christian Federation), for which Faith and Order had responsibility and had set up a small group of music experts. They included Erik Routley, a noted hymnologist from England as moderator; Dieter Trautwein, the composer of many new hymns in German; Joseph Gélineau, a French Dominican whose settings of the Psalms were well known through their use at the Taizé community; and Erich Weingärtner, at the time working as an assistant at the Lutheran World Federation and representing the younger generation. Working on the project – together with Doreen Potter, a musician from the Caribbean married to Philip Potter, and Fred Kaan, of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches – was extremely stimulating, not least because *Cantate Domino* represented the first attempt to make new hymns from Africa, Asia, and Latin America better known. We also tried to get the texts translated into as many of the WCC's working languages as possible. The final manuscript was delivered to the publisher at the end of 1972 and the hymn book appeared in 1974, in time for it to be officially used for the first time at the Nairobi assembly the following year.

Because of my German-speaking, Lutheran background, Lukas Vischer also suggested that I become involved in the doctrinal discussions between Lutherans and Reformed in Europe, known as the Leuenberg conversations. At the request of the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the secretariat for Faith and Order had assumed responsibility for the discussions, which took place at the Leuenberg near Basel in 1970 and 1971, with official representatives from Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in Europe. At their meeting in 1970, the representatives had come to the conclusion that church fellowship could be declared in the near future and suggested drafting the text of a "Concord" that could be submitted to the churches for official approval. I took part in the discussions in 1970, but had not been involved in the intensive preparatory work and was obliged to acknowledge that my knowledge of traditional Lutheran and Reformed doctrinal theology was rather limited. The final report of the 1970 talks received

the overwhelming support of the participating churches, and a year later a specially appointed group, including experts in ecclesiastical law, began the work of drafting a “Concord.” It was the first time that I had been involved in developing an ecumenical consensus text, and I particularly admired Lukas Vischer’s great gift of finding the right form of words in difficult situations that would bring the various parties together. After another round of consultations with the churches, the text was finalized at the Leuenberg in March 1973. Since then it has been signed by more than 103 Lutheran, Reformed, United, and Methodist churches, as well as the Waldensians, the Czech Brethren, and Moravians in Europe, and several related churches in Latin America. Today, it forms the basis of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, and its model of “church fellowship” between confessionally distinct churches has become a model of church unity in its own right.

I learned a lot from two other initiatives in the work programme of Faith and Order, both of which had to do with discussions with representatives of churches that did not belong to the WCC, in the first case with the Seventh-day Adventists, and in the second with the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES), later the Reformed Ecumenical Council. The discussions with the Adventists had begun in 1965 through contacts at the Second Vatican Council between Lukas Vischer and Bert Beach, the Adventists’ international secretary. I took part in the two final meetings in 1970 and 1971, at which we attempted to summarize the areas of basic doctrinal agreement between the Adventists and the fellowship of churches within the WCC, as well as the remaining differences. It became clear to me in these discussions how difficult it is for churches that are the result of a deliberate act of separation and whose identities are affirmed over against others to become part of the fellowship with other churches in the WCC. Nevertheless, the Seventh-day Adventists continue to take part in the annual conference of secretaries of Christian World Communions. It was a similar experience when it came to the discussions with the RES, a small grouping of 41 conservative Reformed churches in 25 countries. Until 1968 the RES had explicitly recommended its member churches against joining the WCC, but its assembly that year agreed to start discussions with the council. Over time, several RES churches have joined the WCC, and in June 2010 the Reformed Ecumenical Council finally united with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Together the two groupings now form the World Communion of Reformed Churches. Even though the discussions in the 1970s did not produce immediate results, they may well have helped to reduce the suspicion of the ecumenical movement among members of the RES. Both sets

of discussions made clear for me that one of the roles that the Commission on Faith and Order can play is to seek contacts with churches outside the formal membership of the WCC and to engage them in ecumenical discussion.

## **The Roman Catholic Church: Tensions over membership**

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This concern also applied to the case of the Roman Catholic Church and its relationships with the WCC. As far as the WCC was concerned, responsibility for these relationships and for the Joint Working Group (JWG) formed in 1966 lay with the Faith and Order Commission and the director of its secretariat, Lukas Vischer. As the assistant to the director I became involved in an unexpected way. My original contract was for three years, but this was extended by another year so I could cover for Lukas Vischer, who had been granted a six-month sabbatical, and in particular serve during this period as the acting co-secretary of the JWG. In June 1971 I thus took part for the first time in a JWG meeting and got to know the key figures from the Roman Catholic side: Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity; Fr Jérôme Hamer, then the director of the secretariat; and Fr Pierre Duprey, who was responsible for relationships with ecumenical organizations. It was, however, a difficult meeting. The euphoric atmosphere that had followed the Uppsala assembly and the visit of Pope Paul VI to Geneva in 1969 had begun to dissipate and the first signs of estrangement had set in. On the surface, however, relationships appeared to be developing positively. In its third report to the central committee in Addis Ababa in 1971, the JWG set out the extensive contacts that already existed between the various WCC departments and their partners in the Vatican.<sup>9</sup> Two study documents on “Catholicity and Apostolicity” and on “Common Witness and Proselytism” were published with the report, and at its 1970 meeting the JWG had turned its attention to Roman Catholic participation in national and local councils of churches.

It had originally been intended to attach to the third report a further appendix on the “Patterns of Relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches.” This appendix was supposed to serve as a basis for discussions in Rome and Geneva about the possible membership of the Roman Catholic Church in the WCC. It had been drawn up by a small working group in 1969/70, but by the time of the JWG meeting in May 1970 it had already become clear that there was a need on the Catholic side for far greater discussion; it was therefore agreed that it should not be published together with the third report in January 1971. At the Stuttgart meeting,

it became apparent that there were indeed strong reservations at the highest level in the Vatican about Catholic membership of the WCC. It was thanks only to the resolve of the leadership of the WCC that the text of the report could be published in *The Ecumenical Review* shortly before the meeting of the central committee in Utrecht in 1972.<sup>10</sup> It has never been officially published by the Catholic side. Problems arose as well in other areas of cooperation, such as SODEPAX and the Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group. I thus became co-responsible for relationships with the Catholic Church at what turned out to be a critical juncture.

## Faith and Order at Louvain 1971

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The meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order at the college of the Flemish Jesuits in the Belgian city of Louvain marked both the midpoint and the highpoint of my time at the secretariat. It was the first time I had taken part in one of the large-scale conferences of the WCC and was able to get to know many of the people whose names I had up until then only seen in documents and reports. It was also the first time that the newly appointed Roman Catholic members had been able to take part in a plenary meeting. They included, among others, Belgian Benedictine Emmanuel Lanne, an influential Catholic figure in the years that followed; as well as Professor Joseph Ratzinger. I still clearly remember Cardinal Suenens, the primate of the Belgian Catholic Church and a well-known figure in post-conciliar Catholicism. His opening address and the liturgy that he led on the Sunday during the commission meeting were an impressive demonstration of Catholic self-confidence.<sup>11</sup>

The commission itself had made the relationship between the traditional issues of the unity of the church and the search for a sustainable future for humankind the subject of a new study process. It therefore seemed a good idea to organize the Louvain meeting around the theme "Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind," although in the past the commission had mostly dealt with study programmes that had already been completed. The working committee agreed to experiment with methodology by confronting questions related to the unity of the church with five issues arising from the work of the WCC, expressing both conflicts within and hopes for the unity of humankind and shedding light on how church unity is seen from the experience of the real conflicts that exist within human society. The idea was also to subject the statement from Uppsala regarding the church as the sign of the coming unity of humankind to critical examination in specific contexts. This ambitious enterprise, somewhat unusual

for a commission agenda, required in-depth preparation that took up much of our work in the preceding twelve months. Reading today the documents for the section work in Louvain, one can see a comprehensive list of the various issues and conflicts that were at the centre of ecumenical discussion well into the 1980s. At the same time it becomes clear just what the commission had let itself in for by widening its traditional focus. Unfortunately, neither these documents nor the reports of the sections themselves have ever been published.

The discussion at the commission meeting on the main theme was never finished. While the ecclesiological relevance of such “contextual” issues was recognized, most commission members did not feel able to expand the traditional theological approach to the unity of the church by examining the critical issues arising from conflicts in society, and thereby to examine the extent to which the traditional approach corresponded to reality.<sup>12</sup> The most profound analysis of the discussions is that of Ernst Lange, who was invited by Lukas Vischer to write a book about the commission meeting in Louvain. As I mentioned earlier, I had got to know Lange during my time in Berlin, before he joined the WCC staff as associate general secretary at the end of the 1960s. By the time of the Louvain meeting, Lange had been compelled by ill health to return to Germany from Geneva. Despite his untimely death in 1974, I consider Lange to be one of the most far-sighted ecumenical thinkers. Unfortunately Lange’s book about the Louvain meeting has never received the attention it deserves, even within the WCC. As far as I am concerned, however, the book – published in English under the title *And yet it moves . . .* – remains the most important description of the challenges facing the contemporary ecumenical movement.<sup>13</sup> Lange summarized his decisive insights in the sentence: “What divides the world, divides the Church, the Church especially.”<sup>14</sup> The commission was unable to arrive at such a clear description of the issues, and, given the framework of the meeting, this would scarcely have been possible. The commission stated however that it had become convinced of the importance and significance of the issues that had emerged in the course of the discussions and underlined the need to continue the study process.

Two other aspects of the commission meeting in Louvain should be mentioned. The first concerned the future of the ecumenical movement, particularly given the changes in the Roman Catholic Church as a result of the Second Vatican Council and its readiness to become actively involved in ecumenical work. In his report to the 1971 central committee in Addis Ababa, Lukas Vischer had returned to the question of a “genuinely universal council,” which had been raised at the Uppsala assembly. On the basis of Lukas Vischer’s report, the

central committee recommended that the Faith and Order Commission at its Louvain meeting should attempt a clearer description of what the objective of a “genuinely universal council” entailed. At the committee in Louvain dealing with this issue, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin of the Church of South India drafted a statement on “Conciliarity and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement” that would become the most important outcome of the whole commission meeting. I clearly remember the moment at one of the late night staff meetings when he outlined the basic tenor of his proposal. We immediately recognized the fundamental significance of this text for the future of the ecumenical movement. Again it was Ernst Lange who in his book described the potentially far-reaching implications of the concept of conciliarity. “The conciliar unity of the Church . . . is a struggle for the truth,” he wrote. “A consensus which failed to produce this conflict and therefore to compel the continuation of this struggle for the truth, would not be the open ended consensus of Christians.” The aim of the document, he continued, was “to differentiate clearly between the goal to which the conciliar process in the ecumenical movement is leading . . . and the contemporary form of this process,” yet at the same time to link the two together. The marks of the “genuinely universal council” to which the ecumenical movement must lead are the presence of the Spirit, eucharistic fellowship, and full reception. The only way to know, however, whether the ecumenical movement is such a conciliar event “is for all of us to take it and try it out as such. In other words, if this conciliar formula *is* the right one, it means ‘deepening our mutual commitment at all levels.’”<sup>15</sup> The significance of conciliarity was later set out in the report of the Nairobi assembly on “What Unity Requires,” where the unity of the church is described as a “conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united.”<sup>16</sup> The theological foundations of the initiative at the Vancouver assembly in 1983 for a “conciliar process for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation” are also to be found here.

The other aspect of the Louvain meeting that needs mentioning also has its origins in the report of the director. I remember how, on the way back from the office one spring evening in 1971, Lukas Vischer asked me what I thought about the idea of proposing that the commission begin working on a common declaration about faith – to find a way of being able to express together the fundamentals of our common faith. Under the heading “Giving Account of the Hope That Is in Us,” Lukas Vischer posed the question in his director’s report: “Has the time not come for the Commission . . . to ask the question: How do we together fulfil our calling today ‘to account for the hope that is in us’? To

try to formulate together the faith in Christ which binds us together? . . . Its necessary and inevitable concern with the theme of unity leads [the Commission] too easily to an unhealthy concentration on ecclesiology. Is it not essential for the Commission, therefore, to try to show how we can together express the hope of the Gospel?<sup>17</sup>

The commission accepted the proposal, and agreed that, as a first step, groups in different contexts should attempt to outline what they saw as the central elements of the gospel. I was not directly involved in the study process which continued through the commission meetings in Accra (1974) and Bangalore (1978) as I was no longer a member of the secretariat, but I continue to believe that the text that was agreed upon in Bangalore, after quite lively and controversial discussion, is one of the most important documents to result from the work of Faith and Order and of the WCC as a whole. The statement in that report that “Christian hope is a resistance movement against fatalism” is one to which I often return.<sup>18</sup>

## **The central committee meeting in Utrecht 1972**

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The central committee met in Utrecht in 1972. It was at this meeting that Philip Potter was elected to follow Eugene Carson Blake as general secretary, an event that would have implications for my own future, and to which I will return at the end of this chapter. The theme of the meeting was “Committed to Fellowship,” which was intended to take further the discussion on the Faith and Order statement on “Conciliarity and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement.” I can clearly recall the introductory addresses by Bishop Karekin Sarkisian, the vice-moderator of the central committee and the future Catholicos of the Armenian Orthodox Church, and by Jürgen Moltmann, just as I can remember the heated debate that followed, particularly on whether there could be genuine fellowship in the church between the poor and oppressed and the rich and powerful. The discussion did not stop there but continued in small groups whose results were summarized in a letter to member churches under the title “Committed to fellowship.” It was one of the finest hours of genuine conciliar discussion. Seldom before or since has the central committee exercised so convincingly its responsibility for the spiritual leadership of the fellowship of churches within the WCC.

Another reason why the Utrecht meeting was significant was because of the presentation of the JWG report on the “Patterns of Relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches.” We were

already aware of some of the reservations in the Vatican from the comments of the secretary of the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, Fr Jérôme Hamer, at the previous central committee meeting. In the meantime, the WCC executive committee had decided that the report should not be presented as an official report but as a study document, with a foreword agreed by both sides. Signed by Cardinal Willebrands and Eugene Carson Blake, the foreword made clear that it was not expected that an application for membership by the Roman Catholic Church "will be made in the near future. Still, all are convinced that cooperation between these bodies must not only continue, it must be intensified."<sup>19</sup> Both the report of Dr Blake and the introductory speech of Lukas Vischer made clear a certain disappointment and disillusionment about the process. Both underlined that the decision of the Roman Catholic Church to hold back from the possibility of membership had created a difficult and anomalous situation. The foreword also suggested that the reservations in Rome about the proposals "will be stated and explained in an article to be presented later."<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, this never happened. As co-secretary of the JWG from 1979 to 1983, I would later have the responsibility of trying to deal with this situation, which has still not been resolved.

Also in Utrecht, the Faith and Order working committee had an intense discussion about the draft report on "Unity of the Church – Unity of Mankind." This led to a new version focusing on the ecclesiological issue of the church as "sign" for the coming unity of humanity and its understanding of the unity of the church as "centred diversity," which was sent out to commission members and the study groups for their reactions. I increasingly had doubts about the laborious process of drawing up revision after revision, especially given the changing and often contradictory proposals for modifications. In March 1973 another meeting was organized to discuss the text yet again in the light of the responses that had been received. Finally, we arrived at a structure for a new version. It would begin with a chapter on "human interdependence as the context of the ecumenical movement," followed by a second chapter picking up the discussion on the church as "sign"; the third chapter would deal with the "conciliar expression of the unity of the church," and the report would conclude by summarizing the critical insights into ecclesiology that had resulted from the discussion in Louvain. I found this outcome very helpful and immediately tried to turn the proposals from Cartigny into a new draft. It was not always easy to get agreement within the team, especially from Lukas Vischer, who naturally had the main responsibility for the report. But finally the text was finished, and it was presented to the Faith and Order working

committee at its meeting in August 1973 in Zagorsk, the main monastery of the Russian Orthodox Church and the seat of its spiritual academy.

The meeting in Zagorsk was my first encounter with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. The city of Zagorsk, today named Sergiyev Posad once again, is forever linked to the famous Trinity Lavra monastery and the name of its founder, St Sergius of Radonezh. At the time of our visit, the monastery was again fully under the administration of the church and served as the summer residence of the patriarch. The monastery, in the middle of a noisy and run-down city, was an oasis and a haven for many people, who came for the services and prayers or for spiritual advice from the priests and monks. I was very impressed by the magnificent churches, the icons, and the spirituality of the services in which we were able to take part. The working committee received a dignified and cordial reception from the patriarch, the bishops, and the priests who were studying there.

I found the discussion on the new draft of the study report less than satisfactory, however. The first section, where interdependence was seen as characterizing the ambivalent situation of humanity, particularly came in for criticism. Similarly, the description of the church as “sacrament” and “sign,” which was central to the main argument of the text, also led to many critical remarks. Only the final section about unity and diversity, catholicity and conciliarity received wider support. A small group summarized the comments under five headings: interdependence, humanity, church as mystery and sign, unity and diversity in the church, and conciliarity. Accepting this proposal, the committee recommended changing the study’s title to “The Unity of the Church in an Interdependent World.” It was intended that after a final revision the text would be published as part of a volume that included essays on its central themes such as interdependence, sign, and sacrament/mystery. This revision never took place. Instead, a relatively short statement formulated by John Deschner at the commission meeting in Accra, entitled “Towards Unity in Tension,” was presented to the Nairobi assembly.<sup>21</sup> For the moment, the process as such came to an end. Some of the issues raised at Louvain continued to be discussed by smaller groups and at consultations, and after the commission meeting in Lima (1982), the general theme was picked up again, this time under the title “The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community.”

Working on this study had been the main focus of my time at the secretariat for Faith and Order. It was a challenging and extremely instructive introduction to theological discussions between representatives of very different

traditions and contexts. What I found interesting and fascinating at the beginning of the study was the opening up of theology to the challenges of human coexistence in an interdependent world. Yet, as the study process continued, this aspect receded further and further into the background. Instead, the classical ecclesiological issues that Faith and Order dealt with reasserted themselves and came back to the centre of the discussion. Looking back, it becomes clear that the commission was dealing with issues that later would be part of the ecumenical discussion under the heading of “globalization.” Since the study remained uncompleted, its critical theological insights were, unfortunately, not brought to bear on the debate about how churches should respond to globalization.

## **The election of Philip Potter as general secretary**

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There was another reason why the central committee in Utrecht was significant, since it was here that the election of a successor to Eugene Carson Blake as general secretary took place. Blake had made it clear when he took office in 1967 that he intended to serve only one term of five years. Thus a search process for the post of general secretary began in 1971. Very quickly the search was whittled down to two names: Lukas Vischer, my director in the secretariat for Faith and Order, and Philip Potter, the director of the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism. Without divulging the shortlist of names being considered, the moderator of the nominations committee, Professor José Míguez Bonino, invited the staff to offer in confidence their expectations about the profile of the future general secretary. I recall stating that the future leadership of the council should be placed in the hands of a general secretary coming from the churches in the southern hemisphere. Although I wasn’t certain, I realized that at least indirectly this was a statement against my own director. I greatly appreciated Lukas Vischer and had great respect for the far-sighted and courageous way in which he had offered new perspectives to the Commission on Faith and Order. I was also greatly indebted to him, since he had been my most important teacher at the beginning of my ecumenical work. Nevertheless, I believed that the changing ecumenical situation, in which the challenges and expectations of the churches of the global South were becoming more and more prominent, should also find its expression in the leadership of the council.

Philip Potter was finally proposed as the sole candidate and was elected by the central committee in Utrecht with an overwhelming majority. I had

had few opportunities previously to get to know him, apart from the times he chaired staff meetings in the programme unit of which Faith and Order was part. Like most of the staff, I was fascinated by him and his charisma, but otherwise I knew him very little. Several months before the Utrecht meeting, we found ourselves next to each other in the queue for the cafeteria. He said he had heard that I wanted to return to Germany the next year. When I agreed, he responded that he didn't think this was a good idea and that I should stay in Geneva a little longer. At the time I thought it was just a way of him indicating that he appreciated my work, especially since he said nothing else. After his election at Utrecht, there was a small staff party in the evening. He came up to me again and said that before I left, we should have a few words together. While we were still in Utrecht, Philip Potter told me he was considering making a number of changes in senior staff positions and that he was interested in placing my name on the list of candidates. He didn't say anything else and I returned to Geneva a little unsure of what I should make of all this.

At the time I was still exploring a number of possibilities for a return to Germany. It was clear to me that continuing my work in Geneva would require the explicit permission both of my regional church in Württemberg and of the EKD, since they had financed my position at Faith and Order. I could only request permission, however, when it was clear what Philip Potter intended. This took a while, as his plans changed several times, and in any case his proposals required the support of the WCC officers. Given this uncertainty, I finally told my regional church in March 1973 that I would be ready to accept a pastorate in Stuttgart. Until early summer, my wife, Elisabeth, and I did not know whether we would really return to Germany or would in fact remain in Geneva. This unresolved situation naturally affected the work in the secretariat, and not least my personal relationship to Lukas Vischer. Finally, shortly before the central committee meeting in Geneva in August 1973, it became clear that Philip Potter intended to propose my name for one of the newly created positions of deputy general secretary. The central committee accepted this proposal and my church subsequently renewed my leave of absence for another three years.