

Tributes

When in November 2009 the Philip Potter Fund for the promotion of future ecumenical leadership, investing in ecumenical leadership formation, was established, the following words of greetings were delivered.

The Years in England: Pauline Webb¹

I have in my hands here a small diary dated 1947. I have no intention of giving it to anyone to read. In fact, I can hardly read it myself, although I wrote it. In those immediate post-war years I was still writing between the lines in order to save paper. This has caused my handwriting to be illegibly small ever since. However, an entry for 25 October, 1947, makes a good start to recalling my earliest memories of Philip. I recorded that on that day I had been asked, as a young student myself, to chair a gathering welcoming people from overseas studying in Britain. The speaker on that occasion was a certain Philip Potter from the Caribbean who was at the time studying for his MTh at Richmond College, London. He spoke about the recent Conference of the World Student Christian Federation that had been held in Oslo, Norway, and where he had been one of the main speakers.

Now I have a confession to make: I was at that time the Secretary of LIFCU, the London Inter-Faculty Christian Union which was regarded as a rival organization to the SCM, the Student Christian Movement. I remember that at King's College, London, we eschewed the SCM because we thought it had too many theologians in it. I reflected this prejudice when, after his speech, I told Philip I thought his address had been inspiring, but I was doubtful about the soundness of what I called his "ecumenical theology." Typically, instead of reacting impatiently to this young upstart who knew no theology

1. Pauline Webb was from 1968 to 1975 Vice-Moderator of the Central Committee of the WCC.

at all, Philip took my comment seriously. So began a debate between us that lasted for many years to come, until I myself became caught up in ecumenical enthusiasm.

We found that we shared, as Methodists, what I would-call a “Weslo-Catholic” heritage. A year later, at a Methodist Youth Conference I attended in 1948, I heard one of the speakers reporting on the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Amsterdam a few weeks before. I was not surprised to learn that the leader of the youth delegation there, and one of the most impressive speakers, had been that same Philip Potter.

Whilst at Richmond College, Philip became the Overseas Secretary of the British SCM, having been previously Study Secretary of the Jamaica SCM. In 1950 he returned to the Caribbean where he was appointed as a ministerial missionary to the island of Haiti. There he learned what it means to preach and live the Gospel among the really poor. Following a bout of ill-health, he came back on to the international scene when he was appointed to work in Geneva as Secretary and Director of the Youth Department of the World Council of Churches.

Our paths crossed again when I took up a post in the Education Department of the Methodist Missionary Society, and met there a Jamaican friend, Doreen Cousins, who was working at the Mission House whilst studying music in London. I soon learned that she was engaged to Philip Potter whom she had met when he was studying at Caenwood College in Kingston. So I became caught up in the preparations for their wedding in the chapel of Richmond College in 1956, when I actually acted as the photographer.

After five years living in Geneva, Philip and Doreen returned to London. Philip was appointed as an Officer of the Methodist Missionary Society (MMS). He was the first person to be appointed to such a post from what we then called “the younger churches,” though in actual fact the Methodist Church of the Caribbean can date its history back further than any other Methodist movement in the world outside Britain. Philip himself had been born in the island of Dominica, where he had inherited in his genes from his mother, a firm Wesleyan tradition, and had also a paternal Roman Catholic background. In London, Philip was given responsibility not only for the whole area of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas, but also for the Methodist Churches in West Africa, who were beginning to move toward autonomy.

Philip and Doreen lived in a manse in Hatch End, a quiet suburb of London, which at that time was not at all multi-cultural, as the whole of London has since become. They became popular with their neighbors and were very hospitable to us their colleagues.

I had by that time become Editor of the MMS, with an office on the top floor of the building, far away from the offices of the greatly revered Area Officers who would

occasionally summon me down to their desks to discuss some particular article or even book they wanted me to publish. But Philip would always come himself, climbing up the spiral staircase to ask for my advice, with a humility which has always characterized him.

Looking back through some of the articles he wrote in those days (though he was never an enthusiastic writer) I recognize a kind of prophetic insight that always permeated his preaching. For example, here in our magazine (quaintly called in those days, "The Kingdom Overseas") is an article by Philip, dated October 1961, called "Glimpse into the Future," in which he wrote, "The decade before us will bring about quite astonishing political and economic changes not only in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, but also in Britain—a change in the relationship between churches which is hard to define. The relationship will be no longer between MMS and 'our' mission fields. Such possessive terms will have to go. A new concept of mission must become evident. Every church, by its very nature, is missionary. . . . This will demand a whole new approach to church life and worship in this country, a new sensitivity to the Church Universal and to the needs of the world."

During this period of working with the Methodist Missionary Society, Philip was charged with the responsibility of seeing several Methodist Churches in West Africa through the process of achieving autonomy—Ghana in 1961, followed swiftly by Nigeria in 1962 and later the Ivory Coast and Dahomey (Benin). Between many visits to these churches, he also kept up the tradition of what we used to call "deputation work" when those of us working at the Mission House together with missionaries on furlough would spend almost all our weekends taking services and conferences throughout Britain. Philip was always in great demand as a preacher and speaker. I remember personally objecting to the fact that he was often asked to speak about racism in Britain. I always argued that it was we British, associated as we are with the perpetrators of racism, who should be asked to speak about it, not those who are its victims. Philip and I had many long debates on the matter, as we travelled up and down the country, usually continuing to discuss theology.

Then one day Philip came up with what was to me a surprising and life-changing suggestion. He recommended me as a participant in a special Programme run by the Union Theological Seminary in New York. It was called PARS—Programme of Advanced Religious Studies, intended, I discovered, to encourage potential future leaders in the ecumenical movement. No sooner had we discussed this over lunch one day with Harry Morton (at that time Scholarships Secretary at the WCC) when I learned that Philip had already called in at the Seminary in New York to arrange for me to be accepted for the year's study course there in a group of fourteen people from as many different churches and countries.

Meanwhile, I had very surprisingly been designated as the Vice-President of the Methodist Conference (the lay leader of the Church) to take office in 1965. This was really, I suspect, a way of trying to shut me up in my campaign for the ordination of women, a campaign in which Philip was one of the few men who gave us any support.

In my role as Vice-President I was then appointed as a delegate of the Methodist Church to the Fourth WCC Assembly, held in 1968. Philip by this time had returned to live in Geneva, having been appointed in 1967 as the Director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism. So he roped me into giving the report of the Section on Mission at the Assembly itself, which, as you can imagine, was a daunting experience for one unused to large ecumenical gatherings. But thanks to the very small group of women delegates at that Assembly, 9% of the total, there was great pressure for a woman to be given office in the World Council's Central Committee. That's how I, to my astonishment and with Philip's encouragement, found myself elected as the first woman Officer of the Central Committee.

I tell all this not because I want you to know my story, but because, like countless numbers of other people, I owe so much to Philip's ability not only to inspire us, but to encourage whatever potential he has seen in us as he has shared with us his enthusiasm both for the ecumenical movement and the whole mission of the church.

I think for me the abiding memory of Philip will always be his leadership of the CWME conference at Bangkok in 1973 on "Salvation Today," where, with his brilliant gift for etymology combined with his skill in communication, he unpacked for us the meaning of the word "salvation," in a way which was illustrated by people working in many different situations in our troubled world.

I shall always count it as one of my greatest privileges that, owing myself so much to Philip's friendship and leadership, I was able to announce to the Central Committee of 1972 the election of Philip as General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. As it happens, in that same year I succeeded him in the office he had once held at the MMS as Area Secretary for the Caribbean, where one of my first projects became a Mission from the Caribbean to Britain, fulfilling some of the prophecy he had made years before.

I can think of no better way of commemorating all that Philip has given to the ecumenical movement, and to the whole mission of the Gospel, than the launching of this Philip Potter Fund. I trust it will give many other people the kind of opportunities Philip opened up to me. Thank you for inviting me to this launching of the Appeal, and of course, to Philip for all that he has done for me and for so many other people in sharing the ecumenical vision.

With Philip on the Way: Thomas Wieser²

I first met Philip in Geneva during a visit from Paris in the summer of 1953, and neither of us suspected then that three years later we would both end up in New York. Philip, who at that time headed up the WCC Youth Department, was asked to move his office to New York for one year, while I had accepted in 1955 an assignment as study secretary for the U.S. National Student Christian Federation. He and Doreen were married in the summer of 1956, and in the fall of that year, they arrived in New York without a place to stay. So we invited them to stay with us until they could find an apartment, thus starting a tradition of hospitality that has been continuing until today.

The reason for Philip's temporary move to New York was to enlist the participation of the youth movements of U.S. churches in the WCC programme. During that time, youth and student work was flourishing in the United States, something that is hard to imagine today. Both the WCC and the WSCF had extensive programmes during the period 1956–1960: The WCC Youth Department was preparing a European conference in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1960; the WSCF conducted a four-year programme on “The Life and Mission of the Church,” leading up to a world conference in Strasbourg in 1960.

Already at that time Philip initiated something that later in Germany was called a *Stammtisch*, evenings with ecumenical friends to discuss current issues. One issue that concerned us especially at that time was the lack of interest of young people in social and political affairs. We called them the “silent” generation. Little did we suspect that within a few years they would be followed by another generation that became radically involved in protest movements in the early 1960s. By then Philip was no longer in the Youth Department, but as Chairman of the WSCF executive committee from 1960–1968 he had his full share of exposure to the student turbulences of those years.

Meanwhile, he spent six years in Britain, from where he returned to Geneva and to the WCC to head up its Division on World Mission and Evangelism. Mission had also become my focus as I worked on the WCC study on “The Missionary Structure of the Congregation,” in the early 1960s. I might have gotten to Geneva almost at the same time as Philip, if I had accepted the post of Secretary of Evangelism of the WCC. But the things going on then both in church and society in the United States were too exciting for me, and especially for my wife Marguerite, for us to think of leaving the States. And even three years later when Philip asked me to join the staff of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME), it took all of his considerable power of persuasion to get her to agree to accompany me for a three-year (!) assignment.

2. Thomas Wieser was from 1970 to 1973 Conference Secretary for the Mission Conference in Bangkok; 1973 to 1979 Secretary of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism; 1980 to 1984 editor-in-chief of *The Ecumenical Review*.

What were the issues in mission then? They were both institutional and conceptual. On the institutional side, integration of the International Missionary Council (IMC) into the WCC challenged the WCC to make mission a central part of its agenda.

Under Philip's leadership this became a reality at the Uppsala Assembly, although not without considerable controversy. The report from the section on "mission" was twice sent back before being accepted by the Assembly.

The other challenge of the integration of church and mission was conceptual: How do we think of the church in missionary terms and of mission in ecclesiological terms? Some participants in the debate spoke of "turning the church inside out," a formula which evoked excitement in some quarters and fear and consternation in others.

Philip asked me to help in the study on "Salvation Today," in preparation for the World Conference under the same title that was held in Bangkok in 1972. The conference took place over the New Year into 1973, so that by the time the meeting ended Philip had exchanged the CWME hat with that of the General Secretary. Because of this accumulation of responsibilities Philip's speech for the conference did not get completed until the day we left for Bangkok, with the result that some of us spent the night on the plane preparing the German or French translation. It is instructive to read that speech today again. As was his custom, Philip placed mission into the contemporary context, and that description bears an almost frightening similarity to that of today, when he speaks of "people of the whole inhabited world coming together willy nilly" which produces the conflicts of an apocalyptic nature.

In hindsight, I also still marvel at the audacity of the title "Salvation Today." But it did allow for new approaches, and the study and the conference experimented with a number of them, such as exploring the theme through other than verbal expressions (music, dance, collage), and devoting one of the main three sections to the relation of mission to culture.

We are skipping over the years of Philip's time as General Secretary and are picking up our relation at the time when Bärbel and Philip returned from Jamaica in 1990. The centennial of the WSCF was approaching. A preparatory consultation formulated a request to Philip to write a centennial history, with me offering to help. For Philip this was in a way an opportunity to return to his "first love," the WSCF, but it also offered him the chance to indulge in one of his other predilections: the study of history. Right at the outset he drew up an outline, not just of the hundred years of WSCF history, but also of world history and of church and ecumenical history. It was again his concern to see everything in context. World history, as well as church and ecumenical history, had to be seen in interaction with WSCF history, and it was in this interaction that their respective meanings emerged. We did not use the expression of the twentieth century

as the ecumenical century at that time, but we actually operated on that assumption, and I am not surprised that it has today become a preoccupation for Philip.

As we were looking back at that beginning, we sometimes marveled at the vastness of the vision of the founders of the WSCF. They were no more than half a dozen who gathered in Vadstena, Sweden, in 1895. And even half a century later, at the time of the launching of the WCC, thinking and acting in a truly worldwide perspective still required a certain amount of vision.

Today globalization has become the order of the day. The vision has become reality, although not necessarily the reality that the founders of the WSCF or of the WCC had envisioned. The world has, as Martin Luther King observed already some forty years ago, “become a neighborhood,” and his dream was that we could “make of it a sister-and brotherhood.” And so the ecumenical journey will need to continue. Philip had the gift to draw people from all walks of life into this journey. I am grateful to have been, for all these more than fifty years, one of his fellow travellers, his *compagnons de route*.

Together on the Journey with Philip Potter: Baldwin Sjollema³

Dear Philip,

Our ecumenical journey together has been a long and rough one. Together we went through so many storms!

I am not talking now of the time in the late fifties, when you were in the WCC Youth Department in those noisy wooden barracks at Malagnou, Geneva, when everyone could hear your contagious laughter throughout the campus!

Rather, I want to recall a tiny little bit of the time around the 1968 Uppsala Assembly and the period that followed that great happening, when you were unanimously elected General Secretary at that memorable 1972 WCC Central Committee meeting in Utrecht!

We were of course all disciples of “the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” The news at that time was about post-colonialism, about the total ineffectiveness of our economic and political structures, and the need for revolutionary change. The theme of Uppsala, “Behold! I make all things new,” helped the ecumenical fellowship to squarely confront some of the most urgent issues in our churches and in society. It was a special time, a *kairos*, particularly, but not only, in regard to racism. We dreamt of a new world and needed to work together for righteousness. And as usual, Philip, you would remind us of the Semitic root of that word, which means to be straight, firm, steel-like. To be just is to be right, acting according to one’s inner being, you said. Security, you added, is about being able to trust one another, about mutual trust. Maybe we should remember that today, as we talk so much about national security!

3. Baldwin Sjollema was former Director of the Programme to Combat Racism.

And justice, you said, is related to fruitful soil and the right use of creation! God's gift of justice, we said together, is also our work, because we are made in his image. And so racial justice, solidarity with the poor, human rights, renewal groups, ecumenical learning and the focus on a truly new community of women and men stem from that time and were greatly and continuously inspired by your vision, Philip.

When we left Uppsala, where Martin Luther King was to have preached the opening sermon and where Kenneth Kaunda and James Baldwin told us about some of the world's most cruel realities, we knew we had a mission, and we believed we were on the journey to the promised land! But seven years later, after the closing of the 1975 Nairobi Assembly, you assembled the staff for a post-mortem and you had to remind us that we were back again in the wilderness, in the desert. The political and the ecumenical climates were worsening. And the very churches that had given us the mandate to act and to take a leadership role, were not really willing to engage in the costly sacrifices they were asked to make.

I remember vividly the many times I went to see you, Philip, in your office after most colleagues had already gone home. I would come to see you about the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR), when I was in despair and frustration because some of our member churches refused to understand the issues and to move with us in an effort to expose the underlying causes of racism and injustice. I badly needed your help and advice because I wasn't clear about how to proceed. You would patiently listen to me and then say, "well, chap, let's first have a little drink," and you would open your cupboard and take out a bottle of something and before tackling the problems you would put me at ease and we would enjoy being *compagnons de route*! You wisely taught me then to take myself a little less seriously! Your style was one of real collegiality and humility, struggling to discover the answers together. Your authority stemmed from that. Never have I sensed a *diktat* or pressure from above.

Philip, I won't forget those most precious moments. They comforted me and gave me new hope. Above all, they helped me to understand what living out our faith is about.

But entering your office, I often also sensed how heavy and impossible your burden as General Secretary was, and how lonely one can be in that spot. It was a daunting task. And in hindsight, I am seriously asking myself: What would have happened to the PCR if Philip Potter had not been General Secretary?

There is another anecdote that perfectly describes Philip's style in crucial moments: on the eve of the 1976 Geneva talks, initiated by the United Kingdom government, between the parties in the Rhodesia/Zimbabwe conflict, Philip decided that it was time to gather for an evening dinner at the WCC the leaders of the four liberation movements taking part in the negotiations. Imagine these four leaders (Joshua Nkomo,

Robert Mugabe, Abel Muzorewa and Ndabaningi Sithole), some of whom had just been released from prison and who had not seen each other for years. In fact, they had become strangers if not enemies to each other. Philip knew that unless the four leaders had at least some common purpose and understanding of the main issues and pitfalls at the outset of the meeting, they would be an easy target for a divide and rule game by Ian Smith and his white cronies.

So, imagine the scene: there we sat uncomfortably at table: several WCC colleagues in between the four leaders, who looked at each other with stony faces. Sensing the mood, Philip, in his inimitable Caribbean style, made a few jokes and told a few stories and slowly the ice began to melt. Then he asked whether the WCC could be of any help, logistically or otherwise, to them during the negotiations. After a silence, Comrade Sithole raised his hand and hesitatingly asked for a typewriter and some carbon paper in order to be able to type his speech for the opening of the conference! There was general laughter, and the dinner became less formal. But a real discussion did not yet take place.

Not until we as staff were supposed to bring the four safely back to their respective hotels in town. As we walked to the car park near the library, suddenly the four gentlemen disappeared in the dark. The Swiss security officials, who were there to protect them, became extremely nervous and asked whether we had seen them. We didn't know either. Until, about twenty minutes later, when they reappeared out of the blue with a smile on their faces! As we drove them back to their hotels they told us: "we have exchanged and agreed to what we are going to say at the opening of the conference tomorrow." This little story is perhaps symbolic of the small contribution to reconciliation we could make, here and there.

Without wanting to overstate what we did at the time, I think it is fair to say that in many ways we had to invent and tread new ground. We tried to relate the agenda of the churches to the agenda of the world. We were ready to risk. We believed that "what is God's gift is humanity's task" (*Life in All Its Fullness*, 89). In your words at the 1983 Vancouver Assembly, Philip, we tried to give heed to your call to become "truly a house of living stones, built on the rock of faith" (Official Report of the 1983 Vancouver Assembly, Report of the General Secretary, 206).