

Risto Lehtonen

# Reflections on the Turbulent Sixties in WSCF

*Looking back on moments of change in WSCF, the period culminating in the quadrennium 1968–1972 undoubtedly represents an era of the most drastic transition in the history of the organisation. It brought about a sudden shrinkage both of the world-wide body and of her member movements; a deliberate distancing from the established ecumenical movement as represented by world and regional organisations of churches; the replacement of virtually all world-wide programmes and functions in favour of regional activities; and an accelerated pace of rotation of leadership. It is still difficult to assess the impact of the period on the basic aims and convictions that tied WSCF together, beyond the desire to maintain the activist heritage of the era and the experience of a general fragmentation.*

## A World in Turmoil

A major factor pressing for changes in SCMs, churches and WSCF was clearly the external world. The social and political context took a turbulent turn at the end of the fifties. The political events and crises made a visible impact on Christian organisations.

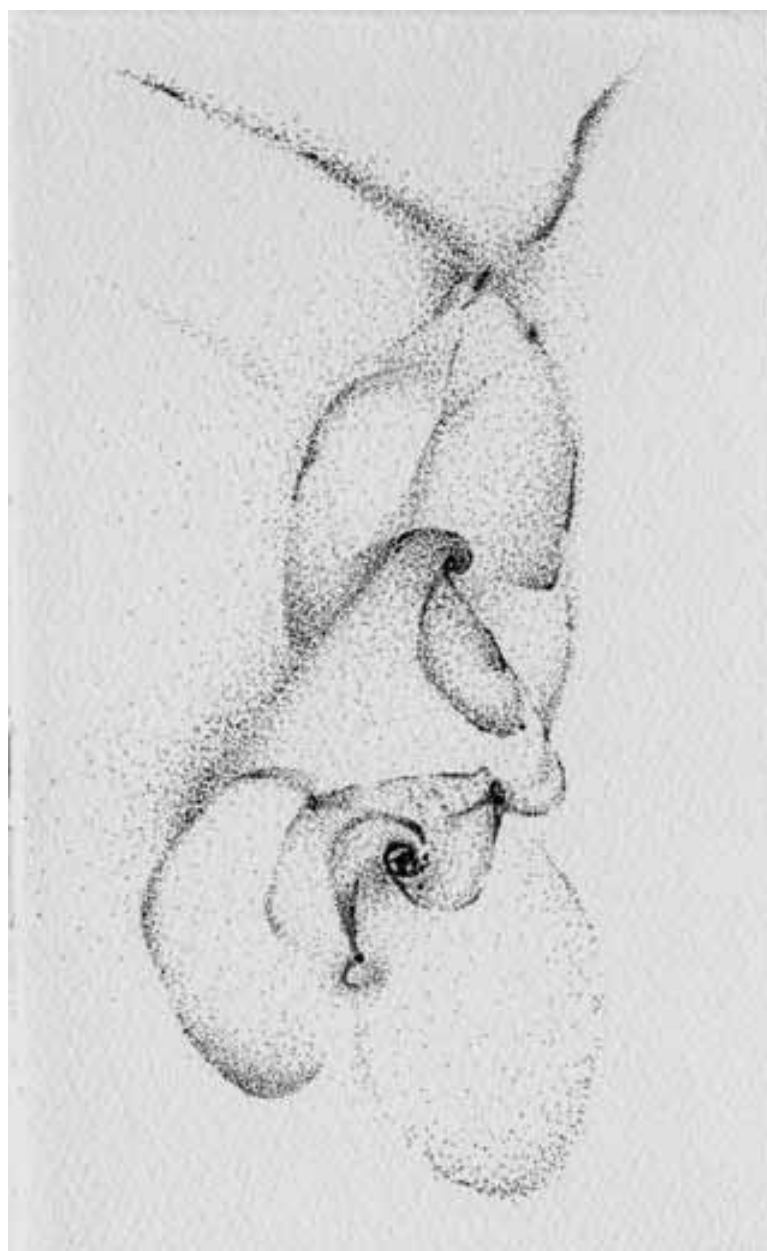
One part of their impact was direct, another part was more subtle. They tested Christian convictions and affected the agendas. Students were often in the front-line in responding to the new situations.

In order to understand the dynamics of the change within SCMs and WSCF in those years, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the sequence of the dramatic turns-of-event which shattered the international community beginning in the late fifties.

No comprehensive listing can be presented here, but to remember a few of them in their depth would be worthwhile. The following headings are just invitations to the study of recent world history:

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The Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the Cuban revolution, the Sharpsville massacre and the rise of the anti-apartheid movement, the building of the Berlin wall, the various military coups in Latin America and the role of the United States in them, the antinuclear movement in Europe, the Vietnam War and the protest movement against it, the Soviet intrusion into Czechoslovakia and the end of the Prague spring, the Middle East crisis and the Palestinian issue, and the Cultural Revolution in China.

### **Industry and Authority**

All of these, as well as many others, affected students and intellectuals on every continent and, in many cases, generated activist responses among them. One particular strand of student unrest arose out of their dissatisfaction with the industrialisation of higher education and another from their growing resistance to authoritarian social as well as university structures.

Demonstrations and protest marches became increasingly a part of student culture first in the United States and gradually in Europe, in a variety of forms centring around different issues on other continents.

The Paris Revolution in May 1968 became, however, the turning point. A wave of student revolts swept over much of Western Europe and North America. Ideologically a mixture of Marxist and anarcho-Marxist ideas gave the overtone for the “revolution.” Its leaders looked with admiration to the Cultural Revolution in China. The movement had a contagious power among large numbers of students.

Many Christian student and youth organisations joined the revolutionary ranks of activists at that time. Revolution became for many of them the way towards a just society and an expression of true Christian discipleship.

All this hit WSCF when it was trying to find her way between aiming at comprehensive ecumenical strategies for Christian presence in academic world and responding to the rapidly spreading revolutionary mood among students. After the Paris uprising, the scene was set for the storm of WSCF.

### **Life and Mission of the Church**

The roots of the 1968–1973 turmoil can be traced in the Federation’s life, beginning in the early sixties. The first signs surfaced in course of the Life and Mission of the Church (LMC) programme, which the General Committee (now known as the General Assembly) initiated in Tutzing, Germany in 1956.

The underlining idea of the programme was to strengthen and expand the work of the Federation globally by linking it with the renewed ecumenical thrust of mission. Significant world-wide mission conferences at the end of forties and early fifties had been pointing to a large-scale transition of the understanding of mission and to a new consensus within ecumenical mission theology.

The accelerating movement of national independence and decolonisation, as well as the rise of Marxism, were placing the mission of the Church in a new social and political context. The LMC was to strengthen the theological and mis-

sionary foundation of the Federation and to make her a mission arm of the Church in the expanding world of higher education. The LMC was to transfer the theological insights, spiritual resources and experiences from the world-wide mission of the Church to the new generation of SCM leaders and members.

The high point of the seven-year LMC programme was the World Teaching Conference on the Life and Mission of the Church (LMC), held in *Strasbourg*, France in 1960. The 700 participants represented SCMs from all continents.

The speakers and resource persons included top senior theologians and mission leaders of the day: Karl BARTH, Daniel Thambyrajah NILES, Willem A. VISSER'T HOOFT, Hans C. HOEKENDIJK, just to name a few.

The world conference was to be followed up in six regional LMC conferences before the 1964 General Committee held in Argentina. The goal was to ensure the presence of the LMC consensus on mission within the SCMs all over the world.

The Strasbourg conference produced a big surprise. Instead of accepting the teaching of the senior leaders and the assumed consensus on mission, a revolt emerged among participants. The theses of the lecturers were widely questioned.

A gap between the world of the new student generation and the Church and mission leaders became evident. The neat plan for the LMC programme had to be reconsidered in light of the social and political developments and the theological foundation for the foreseen ecumenical strategy for student work had to be reworked. This experience was an early sign of forthcoming major shifts in the orientation and also in the ecumenical relationships of the Federation.

A revised plan for regionally-based LMC conferences was carried through in 1960–1964. The seven-year programme was brought to formal conclusion at the 1964 General Committee, which was held at Embalse Rio Tercero in Argentina.

Drawing conclusions from the LMC was one of the main tasks of this gathering. The results are summed up in the document *Christian Community in the Academic World*, which the General Committee officially approved, with even a touch of enthusiasm.

The document is a vivid illustration of the search for a contemporary expression of the missionary witness of the SCMs and churches' student workers. It introduced the term "Christian presence" into the vocabulary of the Federation, a term widely used and interpreted in the succeeding years.

The document proved a useful tool for the discussion of the "raison d'être" of SCMs. It presented the basic issue of how openness and commitment are both essential elements of Christian conviction. It also gave the outline of a plan for regionally-based ecumenical strategies to be developed jointly between WSCF and the regional ecumenical organisations of churches.

## **Church and Society**

The same ferment was present in many churches and ecumenical organisations. The World Council of Churches (WCC) organised a world conference on *Church and Society* in Geneva in 1966. Its outstanding role was to present the demand

for just society to churches and to give a platform also to the theologians who were developing a theology of revolution. This conference influenced profoundly the discussions of the WCC Assembly in Uppsala in 1968.

New programmes were initiated for churches to participate in the struggle against social and economic injustices. Racism, development issues, women's role in churches and in society and the social dimension of the mission of the Church were prominent themes. The face of the WCC was renewed in the subsequent years.

For the radical wing of WSCF, the changes in churches and the new programmes of the WCC were not enough. For them, these new initiatives were only half-hearted responses to the revolutionary challenges.

Many of student and youth participants present at the WCC 1968 Assembly left Uppsala disappointed. Their reaction sharpened the conflict that emerged at the WSCF Turku conference immediately following Uppsala.

### **New Man and New Society**

The decisive events, which gave the contours to the turbulent years of the Federation, began with the World Student Conference in Turku in 1968 and the General Assembly (GA) held at Otaniemi immediately afterwards. The following Assembly at the end of 1972 and at the beginning of 1973 marked the visible completion of the change.

The Turku conference was three years in preparation. The Executive Committee (ExCo) entrusted the planning to a group consisting of students from the different regions. The decision reflected the conviction that now was the time to follow the lead of the current student generation.

The planning group chose "New Man and New Society" as the theme of the conference. It echoed revolutionary aspirations current in Latin American movements, it fit into new left emphases in North America and Europe, and choosing it was an attempt to enter into serious dialogue between Christians and Marxists on the prospects of socialism.

But it intentionally left doors open also for "traditional" post-Bonhöfferian ecumenical emphases, popular among Christian activist students and leaders of those years on almost every continent.

The conference brought together some three hundred participants as was planned. Its course, however, turned out to be very different from the design of the planning group. Participants from North America and Western Europe did not appreciate the topics and the programme design, nor the working methods laid out for them.

They were in their view still a reflection of the "ecumenical establishment," which they found repressive. They demanded a total revision of the programme and working methods, and also a change of the leadership for the conference.

They wanted to turn the conference into a manifestation of the participatory democracy in the footsteps of New Left militants of France, Germany and the United States. The demand of this group of participants divided the conference into two blocs.

After a chaotic extraordinary plenary, where the Asian delegation threatened to walk out, an uneasy truce was reached. The original scheme was not rejected. Nor was a new leadership from the ranks of the militants accepted.

Major changes were made, however, in the way the seminars of the conference were to be run. Several resource persons who had been invited were not allowed by the new seminar leaders to present their papers.

Some speakers, as well as those chosen from the radical wing of the ecumenical movement, were booed by participants. The seminar reports and recommendations for future work were in retrospect extremely thin and sloganish in content, but full of radical New Left and Marxist jargon.

The majority of participants, both radicals and moderates, expressed their profound dissatisfaction about the event in their post-conference evaluations. There was a general consensus, that Turku 1968 – a focal point of the Federation's work since 1965 – had unexpectedly become an unproductive and dissatisfying, even demoralising, experience.

The *Otaniemi* General Assembly (GA) in 1968, immediately after Turku 1968, approved a new structure for WSCF and a new composition of her governing body. This decision opened the way to move from the concept of a world federation into a federation of regions.

This trend was brought to conclusion at the Addis Ababa Assembly in 1972–73 with a further revision of the constitution. The regional units became the primary forums for the cooperation of SCMs, for the development of contemporary Christian identity and of contextual witness, and for the essential decision-making.

### **Confrontation of Ideologies**

Much more changed in WSCF in that period. A bitter struggle about who set the tone for the Federation's work raged for the whole era. It was mainly a confrontation between ideologies and their significance for SCMs.

While admittedly there is a danger of over-generalising, it might be argued that the main battle was between those who wanted to make the Federation a radically new, revolution-oriented organisation; and those who wanted it to continue as an avant-garde ecumenical organisation integrally related to the wider ecumenical movement, struggling for meaningful social and personal witness in the university world and the wider society.

For the former, a mixture of New Left and Marxist ideas was to provide the contextual framework for the theological and political functions. Through the latter, the advocacy against social and economic injustices was to be a central emphasis in all its work and it was to continue its pioneering function in relation to churches, testing new ways for contextual witness, without fixed ideological alliances. The former group preached global march towards socialism, while the latter wanted to be rooted in the different regions and respect diversity within the Christian community.

As the ideological temperature rose between 1968 and 1972, the latter group

wanted to prevent what they perceived as an anarcho-Marxist imperialist takeover and therefore resorted to an all-out regionalisation of the Federation.

It was clearly a defensive move supported primarily by African, Asian and Middle Eastern movements and individuals, and senior friends from other regions. The rationale was to stop the ideological “paternalism” of Western European, North American and Latin American radical activists and to ensure the continuation of an open-ended witness of the SCMs without any Western imposition.

### **Crisis of Identity**

It became evident for the whole WSCF constituency and leadership that world gatherings had no future as a means of developing and testing new ideas for the Christian community. Many even questioned the meaning of efforts to share experiences and visions across regional and cultural boundaries.

With these positions, which signalled the rejection of primary emphases and methods of the world-wide ecumenical movement, WSCF parted company with organisations it had helped to create.

These were the factors which led the radical wing of WSCF to lose interest in WCC and in other established world and regional organisations of churches and, after 1973, virtually to sever her ties with church-based organisations.

The global dimension of the Christian community vanished from this world organisation – at least for a while. The “no” to a world-wide identity of the Federation was confirmed for years to come.

Soon after the Addis Ababa assembly, where the last round of the confrontation took place, the militant activism of the left began to lose steam and ceased to present any significant challenge to the Federation member movements.

It is obvious that the crisis of WSCF was in those years no isolated phenomenon. Its uniqueness, if there is one, is in its displaying in one single organisation so many of the trends, aspirations and problems of the Christian community – that is, facing a social and political conflict and with that an identity crisis of its own.



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### **Réflexions sur turbulences des années soixante dans la FUACE**

Les années 1960 ont marqué un moment turbulent sur la scène politique mondiale: tout d'abord est arrivée la Révolution Cubaine, ensuite le mouvement anti-apartheid en Afrique du Sud, l'escalade de la guerre froide entre l'Union Soviétique et l'Occident, l'expansion du mouvement des droits civils des USA, la construction du Mur de Berlin et la lutte pour l'indépendance du colonialisme en Asie. Ces événements et bien d'autres ont invariablement affecté la vie de la FUACE en inspirant plusieurs étudiants à demander une réponse organisationnelle socialement consciente, en créant une fissure sérieuse entre leur concentration sur l'action politique et la tendance traditionnelle envisageant l'Eglise comme corps sacramental. Les choses vont atteindre un niveau paroxysmal à Tozanzo en 1971, à la réunion du Comité Exécutif où des membres ont essayé d'instiguer une révolution: ils exigeaient une révision complète du budget Bureau Interrégional et un changement du personnel pour la préparation de la prochaine Assemblée Générale. Après un long débat, le groupe radical manquait de justesse de remporter la majorité, mais des réductions drastiques en personnel eurent été approuvées. En dépit de la terrible tristesse et déshumanisation de cette période, nous avons appris que la société ne peut pas embrigader la communauté chrétienne et qu'en temps que chrétiens, nous ne devons pas nous acculturer totalement à la société sécularisée.

**Risto LEHTONEN:**

### **Los turbulentos años '60**

La década de 1960 marcó un tiempo turbulento en la escena política mundial: primero la Revolución Cubana; luego el movimiento anti-apartheid en Sudáfrica, la escalada en la guerra fría entre la Unión Soviética y el Oeste, la expansión del movimiento por los derechos civiles en Los Estados Unidos, la construcción del Muro de Berlín, y la lucha por la independencia del colonialismo en Asia. Estos y otros hechos ocurridos en el mundo, indiscutiblemente afectaron la vida de la FUMEC, inspirando a muchos estudiantes a luchar por despertar una respuesta organizacional de conciencia social, provocando una seria escisión entre su enfoque respecto a la acción política y el enfoque más tradicional respecto a la Iglesia como un cuerpo sacramental. Los hechos estallaron en Tozanzo en 1971, en una reunión del Comité Ejecutivo donde algunos miembros intentaron promover una revolución: demandaban una completa revisión del presupuesto de la Oficina Interregional, y un cambio del personal para la preparación de la Asamblea General que se aproximaba. Luego de prolongados debates, el grupo radical no logró la mayoría por una pequeña diferencia, sin embargo drásticas reducciones en el personal fueron aprobadas. A pesar de la terrible tristeza y deshumanización de este período, pudimos aprender que la sociedad no puede moldear la comunidad cristiana, y que nosotros como cristianos no debemos aculturarnos completamente a la sociedad secular.