



## Lukas Vischer: Lausanne 77 – Fifty Years of Faith and Order, Foreword

### 1. Place and Date of Publication

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### 2. Historical Context

The celebrations of “Fifty Years of Faith and Order” (Pentecost 1977, Lausanne) offered an opportunity to recall the beginnings of the ecumenical movement and to reflect on its contemporary situation. - Lukas Vischer served the World Council of Churches as research secretary and director of the Commission on Faith and Order from 1961 to 1979.

### 3. Summary

The World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne, 1927, had been one of the earliest attempts to bring together representatives of the different Christian traditions – after seventeen years of persistent efforts. The determination of those early pioneers was therefore remembered with gratitude during the 1977 celebrations. But the celebrations were, above all, a call to unity for the churches today.

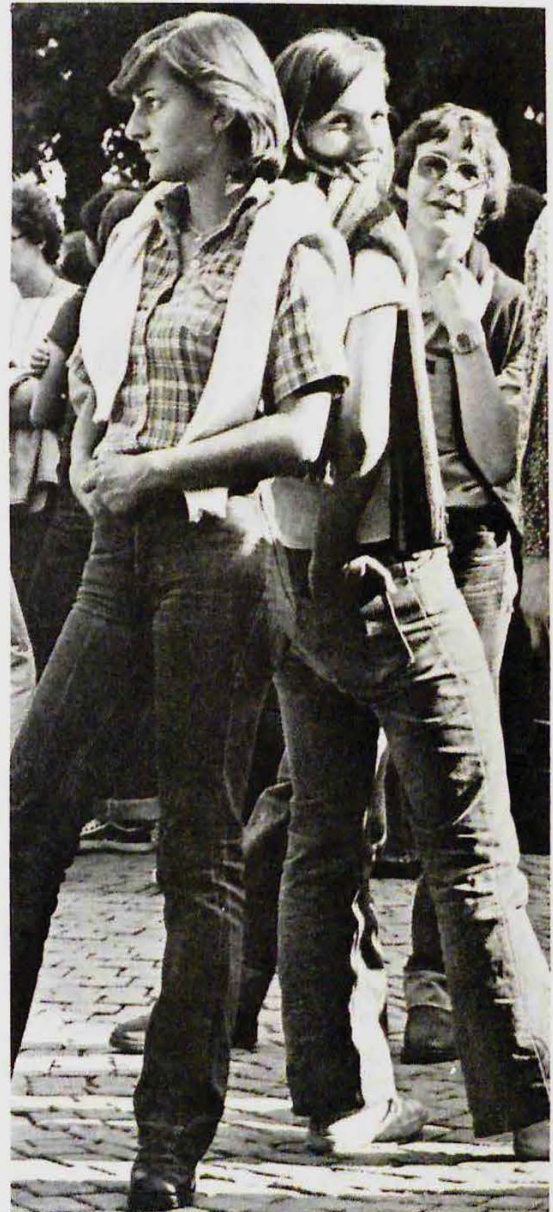
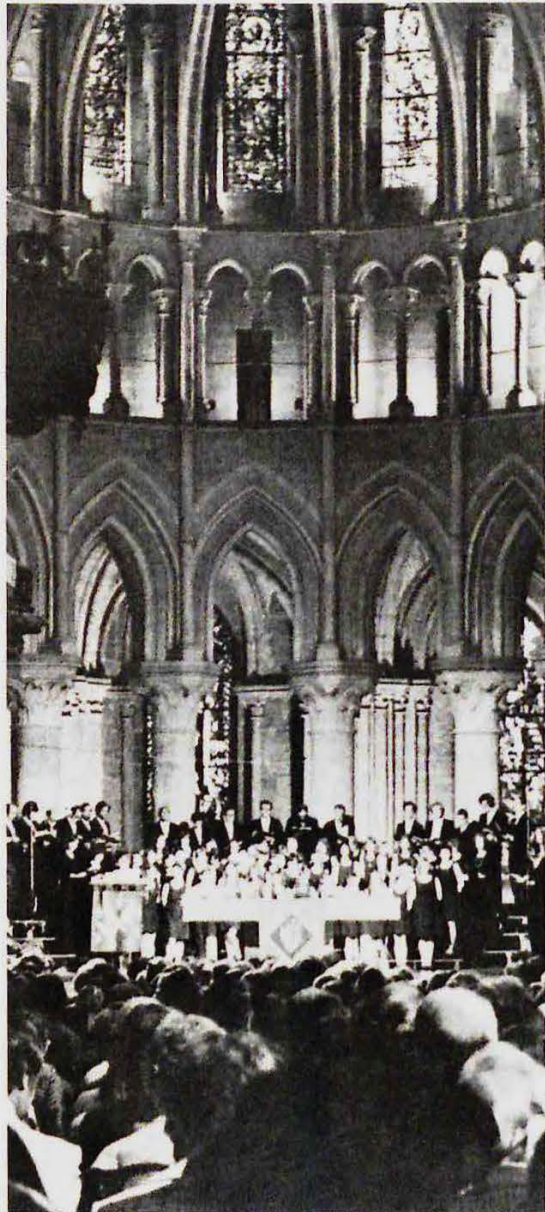
They left me with three outstanding impressions:

1. The joint efforts of the churches in the search of unity constitute already a common *tradition*. Even if the goal may be far-off, the ecumenical commitment has reached the *point of no return*.
2. The Lausanne celebrations were a call to *unity in life*: a call to pray together, live together, bear witness together, sing, discuss. All the worships, gatherings and events were eloquent of an irresistible longing for real fellowship and for signs of genuine solidarity in this world of division, injustice, violence and oppression. - The theological discussions must help to clear the path for the power of love, a path which is still barred by differences inherited from the past.
3. The celebrations were a call to the churches to draw the appropriate *conclusions* from the results so far achieved in the dialogues. The unsolved problems can only find a solution *within* the fellowship of churches.

Yet the churches remain hesitant. It is almost as if they fear unity even as they are seeking it. So it is not surprising that at this point there should spring up in every tradition movements which are almost desperately looking for some way back into the safe shelter or the familiar traditional ways of the past.

On the other hand there are many indications that the new fellowship is really much more solid than the fearful are inclined to suppose. If the churches do take decisions, they will not fall into the void. The fellowship they are seeking is already there awaiting them.

# LAUSANNE 77



Fifty Years of Faith and Order

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Fifty Years of Faith and Order

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## Foreword

The celebrations held in Lausanne over Pentecost 1977 offered an opportunity to recall the beginnings of the ecumenical movement. The World Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne fifty years earlier, in 1927, was one of the earliest attempts to bring together representatives of the different Christian traditions. At that time over 400 delegates had met in the University of Lausanne in a bid to discover what they had in common and what exactly still kept them apart. A conference of this kind was unusual in those days and it is not surprising that seventeen years of intensive and persistent efforts were required before it could take place. The determination of those early pioneers, their refusal to be discouraged by any obstacles, however formidable, deserves to be remembered by us with gratitude today.

But the 1977 celebrations were not concerned primarily with the past. They were, above all, a call to the churches today. "The call to unity is like the flow of a river; it never ceases. It has been sounding with varying accents through the successive generations since the beginning. To us it has of late come with new force through the voice of God's Spirit speaking to the many divided communions of our day, as the call of a shepherd to his scattered flock." These words of Charles Brent, taken from his opening address to the 1927 World Conference, have lost none of their impact today, half a century later. The only difference is that today we are standing at a different point downstream and have to ask ourselves afresh what unity really means.

The celebrations left me with three outstanding impressions. Firstly, a question: What is the real significance of the fact that the churches have already wrestled with this question of unity for such a long time? All these efforts, all these conferences, statements and joint programmes! And still the goal has not been reached. The churches are still divided. Is the quest for unity a hopeless undertaking, therefore?

Another interpretation is possible. Could it not be that the joint efforts of the churches in the search for unity already constitute a common *tradition*? The churches have opened communicating doors. They no longer have only their separate histories. They are already linked through a common history. They can no longer continue along their separate ways. The strength of the common tradition represented by the ecumenical movement is such that the churches are also obliged to look to the future together. Even if certain churches have reservations or doubts about one or other aspect of the ecumenical movement, withdrawal from the growing fellowship is no longer possible. The repeated emphasis in Lausanne on the fact that our joint commitment has reached the *point of no return* was no mere coincidence.

At the same time, the Lausanne celebrations were a call to *unity in life*, to real communion. Certainly no one will wish to deny the need for theological reflection, the clarification of differences, a patient study of the obstacles to unity. But the dialogue between the churches must not become an end in itself. It must be a determined effort to foster fellowship among the churches. It must prepare the way for the churches to pray together, live together, bear witness together. The addresses contained in this volume reflect this note in the celebrations only to a limited extent. It is probably impossible to capture it on the printed page at all, since it was part of the very atmosphere of those days. The hundreds of young people who came together to pray, to sing, to discuss; the evening hosted by the Taizé Community; the afternoon gathering organized by the Focolari movement; the unforgettable performance of the "Gen Verde"; the worship services arranged by the International Ecumenical Fellowship – all these events, severally and together, were eloquent of an irresistible longing for a real fellowship of life, for signs of genuine solidarity in this world of division, injustice, violence and oppression. The theological discussions must help to clear the path for the power of love, a path which is still barred by differences inherited from the past.

The celebrations were also a call, therefore, to the churches to draw the appropriate *conclusions* from the results so far achieved in the dialogue. Certainly there are still problems to be solved. In many respects the ecumenical movement is still in its infancy and it would not be difficult to list a whole series of questions still requiring agreement. But these unsolved problems can only find a solution *within* the fellowship. Yet the churches remain hesitant. It is almost as if they fear unity even as they are seeking it. Must they really move into this unfamiliar territory of a new fellowship? Will the ground be firm under their feet? It is not surprising, therefore, that at this point there should spring up in every tradition movements which are almost desperately looking for some way back into the safe shelter or the familiar traditional ways of the

past. On the other hand there are many indications that the new fellowship is really much more solid than the fearful incline to suppose. If the churches do take decisions, they will not fall into the void. The fellowship they are seeking is already there awaiting them.

LUKAS VISCHER