

Abstract Visser 't Hooft (1900-1985). A Life Dedicated to Ecumenism

Some called him God's diplomat, others the ecumenical pope, but he was also called acerbic and difficult. Willem Adolf Visser 't Hooft was one of the best known Dutch theologians outside the Netherlands. He put his seal upon the idea of the world church. Even at an early age he devoted himself to international youth work and work among students (Dutch Student movement NCSV, Young Man's Christian Association, World's Student Christian Federation). His most important work was the World Council of Churches, of which organisation he was the general-secretary from its founding in 1948 until 1966. In a convincing way Visser 't Hooft drew consequences from the unity of the church for the divisions in the world. He expected from this a healing effect. Under his guidance the World Council of Churches developed into an influential global player. Visser 't Hooft and his people were listened to.

There is hardly any important theme in the 20th century that Visser 't Hooft did not attend to. The aftermath of the First World War, the effects of the economic crisis, the rise of Hitler, the Second World War, relations between the occupied Netherlands and the Dutch government in exile in London, work among refugees and reconstruction, reconciliation, decolonisation, missionary work, the Cold War, the founding of Israel, Apartheid, the Cyprus crisis, the Cuba crisis, secularisation and emancipation. But after a period of church renewal, there was a backlash. Criticism arose at the ecumenism of institutions and the Roman-Catholic Church did not become a member of the World Council of Churches. The membership of the Russian Church for which Visser 't Hooft had worked very hard, was controversial. Not all his plans were successful, but Visser 't Hooft put the World Council of Church on the map of history as an important concrete form of the unity of the church.