

## “Seekers of truth and justice”: an investigation of the Accra Declaration’s ecclesiology<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This article investigates the implied ecclesiology of the *Accra Declaration* (WARC, 2004). It does this by viewing the document through the lenses of various ecclesiological categories: Biblical images or metaphors, social manifestations of the church, Protestant and Catholic marks of the church, the threefold office of prophet, priest and king, the four ministries or dimensions of the church and Avery Dulles’s *Models of the Church* (1976). This is done in an appreciative manner, yet reveals some of the shortcomings of the document’s implied ecclesiology. It also lays the foundation for deeper reflection on the role of the church with regard to social issues such as global economic injustice and ecological destruction.

### ABSTRAK

“Seekers of Truth and Justice”: ’n Ondersoek na die Accra-verklaring se ekklesiologie

Hierdie artikel stel ondersoek in na die *Accra Verklaring* (WRGK, 2004) se veronderstelde kerkbegrip. Hiervoor word verskeie ekklesiologiese kategorieë as lense gebruik waardeur die dokument bestudeer word: Bybelse beelde en metafore, sosiale gestaltes van die kerk, Protestante en Katolieke tekens van die ware kerk, die drievoudige amp van koning, priester en profeet, die vier bedienings van die kerk en Avery Dulles se “Models of the Church” (1976). Die ondersoek word op ’n waarderende basis gedoen, maar wys ook van die veronderstelde ekklesiologie se swakpunte uit. Die artikel lê ook ’n goeie fondasie waarop dieper oor die kerk se rol in sosiale kwessies, soos ekonomiese en ekologiese ongeregtigheid, besin kan word.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The public challenges facing the globalising world raise fundamental questions regarding the church and the role that it is called to play within societies. This has been the case throughout the long history of the church. One way of approaching this interplay between public challenges and the church is by investigating church documents that address such challenges. One such document, and the focus of this article, is the Accra Declaration (Accra) by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches’ (WARC’s) general council (WARC. 2004. *The Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth*. [http://www.warc.ch/documents/ACCRA\\_Pamphlet.pdf](http://www.warc.ch/documents/ACCRA_Pamphlet.pdf))

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This article investigates the implied ecclesiology of Accra. This is done by using seven ecclesiological categories as lenses through which to view the document. These categories range from Biblical images of the church, to Protestant and Catholic marks of the church, to Avery Dulles's *Models of the Church*. The end result is hopefully a rich tapestry that reflects something of the ecclesiology that featured in the back of the general council's collective mind in Accra, 2004.

The reasons for doing such a study are the following: 1) to investigate how the WARC general council views the church within the context of global economic injustice and ecological destruction; 2) to explore the interplay between traditional ecclesial images and metaphors and the unique context within which the church is called to be the church today; 3) to begin asking questions regarding the coherence, credibility, relevance, adequacy and authenticity of ecclesiologies that function within this delicate interplay between the church and the publics that it addresses.

The article will be concluded with a brief reflection on the findings and how they may inform further critical reflection.

## 2. BIBLICAL IMAGES OR METAPHORS

In his well-known study *Images of the Church in the New Testament* Paul Minear (1960) identifies and describes 96 different images of the church used in the New Testament (NT). Some of these ecclesiological images also feature in Accra's response to economic injustice and ecological destruction. Due to space restrictions, only two are discussed here (cf. Pretorius, 2011: 24 for a more complete discussion).

### 2.1 The flock and the Good Shepherd

Paragraph 28 of Accra makes reference to Jn. 10:10, and is a clear expression of the NT *flock imagery*. In it God calls the church to follow Jesus in his "public mission" for fullness of life for all. This image extends through paragraph 29 with reference to Jesus being the "Good Shepherd" who lays down his life for his sheep (Jn. 10:11). The predominant image in both John 10's allegory and Accra is that of the church, a flock of sheep, dependent on its Good Shepherd, Jesus, for life.

It is also significant to note *how* Accra employs the flock imagery. According to Minear (1960:87), "constant reference to the story of Jesus, culminating in his death for men" prevents the NT flock imagery from distortion. In other words, *Jesus* becomes the norm, the Good Shepherd to whom church leaders, false prophets and wayward sheep are constantly compared and judged (1960: 87). Similarly, in Accra, the church's identity and calling is rooted in its calling to follow Jesus in his life giving mission, spelt out in Luke 4:18 (Accra 28)<sup>2</sup>. This causes Accra to "reject any church practice or teaching which excludes the poor and care for creation in its mission; giving comfort to those who come to 'steal, kill and destroy' (Jn. 10:10) rather than following the "Good Shepherd" (Jn. 10:11)" (Accra 29). Thus, Accra employs the flock imagery to define the church's mission of fullness of life for all, but also to identify and reject church practices that sabotage this mission by not following the "Good Shepherd".

### 2.2 The called *ecclesia*

Another important Biblical image in Accra's ecclesiology is that of "calling". Within paragraphs 26-35, the word "call" is used 7 times with God as the subject. The NT word often translated as church, *ecclesia*, stems from the Greek root *kaleo*, which means "call". Hans Küng (1968: 82) adds that the NT use of *ecclesia* is rooted in the Septuagint. Therein *ecclesia* is the preferred Greek translation of the Hebrew word *kahal*, which, when qualified by the phrase "of the Lord,"

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2 Parenthesised figures indicate *paragraphs* in the Accra Declaration.

refers to the congregation of those chosen by God; gathering around Him as their centre. This is the most common use of *ecclesia* in the NT (1968:83-4).

Similar language is found in paragraph 30: “We believe that God calls men, women and children from every place together, rich and poor, to uphold the unity of the church and its mission, so that the reconciliation to which Christ *calls* can become visible” (my emphasis – HP). God’s call is the crux of this very loaded ecclesiological confession. It is in God’s call that the church finds its unity in diversity (*men, women and children... rich and poor*), its broad catholicity (*from every place*), and its apostolic *mission of reconciliation*. Thus, paragraph 30 confesses faith in the *ecclesia* – a people gathering around Christ’s call to unity and reconciliation.

The word “call” occurs another six times in paragraphs 26-35. In each case God is the subject of the verb and the object is implicitly or explicitly “the church”. These statements confess what Accra believes about the church’s *identity* (call to *be*), and its *mission* (call to *do*). Thus, the *ecclesia* image in Accra expresses something of the dynamic interplay between the church as a *gathered* community and as a *gathering* of people for a particular purpose (cf. Kung, 1968: 84; 325-330).

Once again, these statements of faith (Accra 26, 28, 30) are consistently followed by a paragraph in which a certain theology (Accra 27), church practice or teaching (Accra 29, 31) is *rejected*. Thus, the calling of the church does not only qualify the church in a positive manner, but sets boundaries of the church’s identity and mission by way of rejection.

### 3. MANIFESTATIONS OF THE CHURCH

According to Smit (2002:246), the English term “church” can refer to at least six contemporary manifestations of the church. These include local *congregations*, *worshipping communities*, *denominations*, *the ecumenical church*, *individual believers* and *voluntary Christian associations* (2002:246).

As a product of the WARC, Accra is firmly situated in the ecumenical and Reformed traditions. The implications of this are twofold. Firstly, the authors recognise the significant *challenge* that proper reception holds for the ecumenical and Reformed traditions (Accra 15) (cf. Smit, 2009: 182). The difficulty and controversy surrounding Reformed and ecumenical structures of authority are well known (2009: 182). Secondly, the authors emphasise (Accra 15, 38, 39, 40) the *need* for proper reception as they share the central Reformed belief that confessions should be embodied within the lives of local congregations and believers (2009:182).

Overall, the council is aware of Reformed ecclesiological structures; calling on member churches, to receive, interpret and communicate the document to the *local congregations* (Accra 37-40) – the building blocks of the Reformed church (Smit, 2009:182). Accra claims not to be the final authoritative word and calls on “member churches” (Accra 39), “local congregations” (Accra 39), “other communions, the ecumenical community, the community of other faiths, civil movements and people’s movements” (Accra 41) to partake in an “on-going and global process of reflection and resistance” (2009:182). In spite of this typically Reformed emphasis, Accra pays very little (if any) attention to the church as *worshipping community* and to *individual believers*. Ironically, this damages the chances of a good reception as the document fails to address some of the most important manifestations of the church, in spite of its emphasis on the need for proper reception. Accra doesn’t recognise the primacy of the church as *worshipping community*, while its lack of reference to the role of *individual believers* underestimates the immeasurable public role that believers play as disciples in their everyday lives (Smit, 2008a 72-75; 2008b:110-111).

## 4. PROTESTANT MARKS OF THE CHURCH

After Luther's initial ecclesiological proposals it soon became necessary for the second generation Reformers to develop more coherent doctrines as the separation became more permanent (McGrath, 2001:482). Calvin responded with his Reformed marks of the true church: 1) that the Word of God should be properly preached and listened to, and 2) that the sacraments should be rightly administered (Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.9.). Soon, the Strasbourg reformer Martin Bucer added church discipline as a third mark (2001:484). These marks justified the Reformers' break from Rome, but also sought to prevent further division within the Protestant churches (2001:483). Calvin's marks of the church have been very influential throughout the Reformed tradition and are also found in the Belgic Confession (art. 29) (Alston, 2002:60-1).

### 4.1 The preached Word

Accra's emphasis is on the Word of God being properly preached. The importance of Scripture in Accra already supports this. From the introduction where paragraph 1 recalls that the "churches reflected on the text of Isaiah 58:6", to paragraph 42 where Deuteronomy 30:19 (*Choose life that you may live, you and your descendants*) is referred to, the document is rich in Scriptural references and allusions. In addition, the confessional form of the document, especially paragraphs 15 to 36, serve to publicly proclaim God's good news *to the world*. Thus, Accra seems to have integrated Karl Barth's warning against Reformed ecclesiology that is without a sense of mission – where proclamation is only directed toward the faithful (cf. Alston, 2002:61; Barth, *CD* (1962), IV/1:764-83).

As mentioned in chapter 3 above Accra places a lot of emphasis on reception, which points to another aspect of Calvin's definition of the church. In addition to "the Word of God purely preached" Calvin sometimes added: "... and listened to." For Calvin pure preaching was not enough. The Word of God had to be heard and accepted with ears of faith!

However, there is a polemic aspect to Accra's use of Scripture as well. After the church is called to stand *with* victims of injustice (Micah 6:8) and *against* forms of injustice (Amos 5:24) (Accra 26), the document rejects "any theology that claims that God is only with the rich and that poverty is the fault of the poor..." and "any theology which affirms that human interests dominate nature" (Accra 27). Then, after referring to Jesus' public mission of life and justice (Accra 28), the council rejects "any church practice or teaching which excludes the poor and care for creation in its mission" (Accra 29). These examples suggest that just and fair theology becomes the new criterion for what "pure preaching" entails. In addition, the language of rejection vaguely introduces Bucer's mark of *discipline* even though the consequences of "rejection" are not spelt out. This raises questions regarding the WARC's capacity to enforce discipline (Cf. WARC expulsion of DRC in Ottawa, 1982) and whether this is indeed implied in the document.

### 4.2 The sacraments

In Calvin's eyes (to speculate for a moment) Accra would perhaps have presented a very one sided depiction of the true church. Keeping in mind that Accra is not a treatise on the church, it is still remarkable that no reference or allusion is made to either Baptism or the Eucharist, which are very central to Calvin's ecclesiology (see e.g. Horton, 2009:405-414) and equally relevant to social questions (Smit, 2008b:103-4). Here Accra breaks from Reformed ecclesiology and seems to lean towards a more critical approach to the sacraments characterised by, amongst others, Camillo Torres, José M. Castillo and Ulrich Duchrow (Forrester, 1995:151-2).

These theologians represent an approach to the relationship between the sacraments and

ethics, that view the practice of sacraments, especially within contexts of injustice, as affirming and upholding the *status quo*. However, such an understanding of worship and rituals can be contested on both social and theological grounds and many have in fact pointed to the transformative, subversive role that rituals such as baptism and Eucharist can play (Forrester, 1995:150; Smit, 2008b:103-4). The WCC's *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document (1982) is an example of such an approach that rather views the sacraments as the nourishment that inspires and anticipates God's grace and justice<sup>3</sup>.

With these strongly opposing views in mind, one is at a loss to interpret Accra's silence on the matter of sacraments. Did the authors remain silent to avoid taking sides in the debate? Or should the silence be seen as a covert statement that the sacraments are no longer relevant – possibly even a distraction – where matters of economic justice are concerned?

## 5. CATHOLIC MARKS OF THE CHURCH

From its earliest beginnings, believers came to confess their faith in the church. One such confession is found in the early Nicean-Constantinopolitan Creed that confesses faith in the *one, holy, catholic and apostolic* church. Over time these four adjectives became known and used as "marks" or "attributes" of the church. Most ecclesial traditions employ the marks as norms or criteria that define the church's theological self-understanding given by God (Smit, 2002:250). In the Reformed tradition especially, the marks are not so much attributes of the church as such, but rather of Jesus Christ and the gospel, the ultimate source of the church (Dulles, 1976:126-7).

### 5.1 Unity

The unity of the church stems from its *one* faith in *one* God and Father of all, *one* Lord, *one* Spirit, *one* baptism, *one* bond of love and *one* hope (Eph. 4:1-6) (Smit, 2002:250; Küng, 1968:273; Moltmann, 1977:342). Unity has always been a major theme in the ecumenical movement, and a very contentious one in Reformed circles (2002:250).

The *first* explicit claim that Accra makes regarding unity, which alludes to similar statements in the Confession of Belhar, is in paragraphs 30-31:

"We believe that God calls men, women and children from every place together, rich and poor, to uphold the unity of the church and its mission, so that the reconciliation to which Christ calls can become visible. Therefore we reject any attempt in the life of the church to separate justice and unity."

This statement says a lot about *how* Accra understands the unity of the church: Firstly, unity is seated in a shared *calling* from God (see also Confession of Belhar (1986) par. 2). Secondly, unity must take on *visible* forms in the church's being and mission (see Belhar par. 3-5). Thirdly, for Accra unity transcends barriers of gender, age, geography and socio-economic standing (see Belhar par. 7-9). Finally, Accra sees a vital connection between justice and unity. Here Accra alludes to Belhar (articles II and IV) and the Declaration of Barmen (1934, Article I/8.01) by

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3 Cf. for e.g. the WCC's *BEM* document on the Eucharist: "The eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the one family of God and is a constant challenge in the search for appropriate relationships in social, economic and political life... All kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ... (par. 20) Reconciled in the Eucharist, the members of the body of Christ are called to be servants of reconciliation among men and women and witnesses of the joy of resurrection (par. 24).

insisting on the “tight connection” between unity and justice (Smit, 1984:54-55). Thus, Accra’s ecclesiology builds on two relatively late Reformed confessions that both make direct reference to the four marks of the church (cf. Barmen, I/8.01 and II/8.06; and Belhar, par. 2).

The *second* statement regarding unity forms part of the confession of sin in paragraph 34. In spite of its primary focus on justice, Accra still deems it necessary to address disunity in its confession of sins. This too suggests that Accra relies on *Belhar* in which article 2, *unity*, and article 4, *justice*, are bound together in a mutually inclusive relationship via article 3, *reconciliation*. Accra also recognises that the disunity *within the Reformed family* has impaired the church’s “ability to serve God’s mission in fullness” (Accra 34).

As the three major streams within the WCC illustrate, unity in the ecumenical movement is sought either in mission and witness, service and public involvement, or faith and order (Smit, 2002:250-1). In the *third* place, Accra sees the common confession and covenant before God binding the church together to work for justice. This conviction becomes explicit in paragraph 37 whereby Accra questions the legitimacy of the popular maxim: “service unites while faith/doctrine divides”:

“By confessing our faith together, we covenant in obedience to God’s will as an act of faithfulness in mutual solidarity and in accountable relationships. *This binds us together to work for justice ...*”

*Finally*, in paragraph 41, the general council “commits the WARC to work together with other communions, the ecumenical community, the community of other faiths, civil movements and people’s movements for a just economy and the integrity of creation...” Thus, in addition to paragraph 37, where the common confession is the binding factor, paragraph 41 suggests that joint efforts for justice bind Reformed churches beyond its own walls with other ecclesial traditions, faiths and secular civil movements. Accra moves beyond a typically Reformed understanding of unity to share in a more recent development in the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order movement that closely relates ecclesial unity and universal unity of mankind as an eschatological category (cf. Bergjan, 1994:68-70).

## 5.2 Holiness

The Hebrew word for holiness, *kadad* implies being separated or set apart and often has God as subject (Küng, 1968:324; McGrath, 2001:499). This corresponds well with the New Testament *ecclesia* imagery discussed above (McGrath, 2001:325). The holiness of the church is primarily a theological distinction that is closely associated with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the church’s unique calling by God to witness to God’s grace and love (Smit, 2002:251; McGrath, 2001:499-500; Küng, 1968:329-330).

In Accra, the holiness of the church has an important, albeit implicit place, and is closely related to the *ecclesia’s* unique calling from God. This calling apart by God is reinforced and qualified by three other important theological motifs in Accra: 1) justice, 2) the sovereignty of God, and 3) confession of sins.

In Accra holiness is understood primarily in terms of *justice*. Within its particular context, the general council identifies the struggle for justice with the *integrity* of the church’s faith (Accra 16). This relationship is developed further in paragraphs 24-29. Just as the church’s call to be holy, originates in God’s holiness, the church’s faith in the God of justice also results in its calling to be a people of justice (Accra 24). This leads the church to reject any ideology or regime “that puts profits before people, does not care for all creation, and privatises those gifts of God meant for all” (Accra 25). This pattern continues in paragraphs 26-29. Thus, in language typically used

to denote holiness (“God is... therefore we are... therefore we reject...”), Accra sacralises justice as a central concern in the life and mission of the church of the Holy One. Secondly, for Accra the church is holy wherever it acknowledges and respects *God’s sovereignty* over the whole creation (Accra 18). This emphasis on God’s sovereignty leads it to reject “any claim of economic, political and military empire which subverts God’s sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God’s just rule” (Accra 19). Here, the church’s holiness rests in its confession of God’s sovereignty over every aspect of life and the consequent rejection of all that denies it (Accra 21). Thereby the claim and call to justice mentioned above extends beyond the boundaries of the church and addresses the whole world.

Finally, an important link is made between holiness and *confession of sins*. Jürgen Moltmann, in his treatment of the church’s holiness, states that “the church is holy because it is sanctified by Christ’s activity in and on it” (1977:353). Thus, when the church prays for forgiveness it acknowledges both its sin *and* its holiness through God’s forgiveness (1977:353). Therefore the church is holy wherever it openly acknowledges and confesses its sins (1977:353). The general council affirms this by confessing its own guilt in contributing and benefitting from unjust systems, and calls on churches in the Reformed family to do the same (Accra 34).

### 5.3 Catholicity

The word catholic is derived from the Greek phrase *kath’holou* which means “full” or “the whole” (McGrath, 2001:500). The catholicity of the church refers to its belief in the *whole* of the gospel, extended through the *whole* of time and place, including *all* brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers, and that the gospel has implications for the *fullness* of life (Smit, 2002:501).

The catholic spirit of Accra is already clear from the first paragraph where it addresses the theme of “*global economic injustice and ecological destruction*”. Thereby, the document shows concern for the current economic-ecological predicament – to the widest extent possible. This catholic disposition is developed further in paragraph 17:

“We believe in God, Creator and Sustainer of *all* life, who calls us as partners in the creation and redemption of the *world*. We live under the promise that Jesus Christ came so that *all* might have life in *fullness* (Jn. 10:10). *Guided and upheld by the Holy Spirit we open ourselves to the reality of our world.*” (My emphasis – HP)

This short Trinitarian paragraph reveals three important presuppositions regarding catholicity. 1) The catholicity of the church is *quantitative*; stemming from its faith in the Creator and Sustainer of *all* life. 2) The catholicity of the church is *qualitative*; resting on Christ’s promise of life in *fullness*. 3) Guided by the Holy Spirit, this catholic faith and hope open the church to the reality of the world, extending beyond its own boundaries in true catholicity.

As with holiness above, God’s sovereignty also plays an important role in the church’s *catholicity* (Accra 18). This relationship is seen in paragraph 20 where God’s inclusive covenant with all of creation (Gen 9:8-12) is chosen above the covenant made with Abraham (Gen. 12-17). This sees the sovereign God’s grace and blessings extending beyond Israel and the nations to the non-human creation as well (Accra 20).

### 5.4 Apostolicity

In the Reformed tradition *Apostolicity* primarily refers to the church’s origins and continued association with Christ’s apostles (McGrath, 2001:502; Alston, 2002:60). Thus, for Reformed Christians continuity is not based on historical or judicial grounds, but rather on the church’s authenticity and the truth of its message and life (Smit, 2002:251; Alston, 2002:60).

In Accra apostolicity takes form in the calling to follow Jesus Christ in his public mission of justice (Accra 28). Thus, apostolicity does not rest on what Dulles (1976:120) calls an “apostolic deposit of doctrine, sacraments and ministry,” but rather on remaining faithful to “the public mission of Jesus” as defined by Luke 4:18 (Accra 28). As the apostolic church it *confesses*, *witnesses* and *acts* in obedience to the Crucified Lord, which inevitably leads to suffering as a consequence (Accra 35).

## 6. PROPHETIC, PRIESTLY AND ROYAL OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

In their descriptions of the public work of the church, some ecclesialogists have turned to the threefold office of prophet, priest and king. Methodist scholar Geoffrey Wainwright is a contemporary proponent of the threefold office of Christ who also recognises the threefold office as a suitable ecclesiological framework (1997:109). The following section maps Accra’s implied ecclesiology according to Wainwright’s treatment of the threefold office.

### 6.1 Prophetic

Accra’s emphasis is primarily on the prophetic task. This is evident due to the document’s confessional form through which it conveys “the word and work of God to the world” (Wainwright, 1997:121). Thus, the form of Accra itself speaks of a church that is called to witness to God’s will and saving work in a very particular context (Accra 15-16). In doing so Accra follows its Lord’s example of being a herald of God’s grace (paragraph 28 - Luke 4:16-24) and responds obediently to Jesus’ commission in Mat. 28:16-20 (1997:121-2; 131). This does not however preclude the danger of persecution. Indeed, Accra envisions a prophetic church, which, like most prophets, suffers in service of its message (1997:132).

Then, in paragraph 32 the prophetic office of the church is given an eschatological edge: “We believe that we are called in the Spirit to account for the hope that is within us through Jesus Christ, and believe that justice shall prevail and peace shall reign.” This agrees with Wainwright’s (1997:133) vision of the church’s prophetic office: “to help the world see its own best future.”

### 6.2 Priestly

In Accra the priestly functions of the church are first heard in the calls to stand with the poor (Accra 26), hear the cries of the suffering (Accra 1, 5, 28) and look through the eyes of the powerless (Accra 11). Such solidarity with the poor and marginalised evokes images of Christ’s vicarious suffering and mediating advocacy as the eternal High Priest (Wainwright, 1997:138-9).

Then, in Paragraph 30 of the Accra Declaration, God call’s people together “so that the reconciliation to which Christ calls can become visible.” Here the church is called to participate in the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, the ultimate High Priest (Heb. 7:11-28). Thus, the church fulfils its priestly role by embodying reconciliation where there is alienation and estrangement (1997:152-153).

Finally, the priestly office is implied in the doxology of paragraph 36, which is a quote of the Magnificat (Luke 1:52f). Indeed, prayer, worship, thanksgiving and praise form part of the living sacrifice that the church, the “holy priesthood”, gives to God (Wainwright, 1997:137;145-149) (1 Peter 2:4).

### 6.3 Royal

In Accra the kingly functions of the church are subsumed in the prophetic office. Thus, where the royal office is concerned, Accra points away from the church towards the *sovereignty of God*: “We believe that God is sovereign over all creation. ‘The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof’

(Ps. 24:1)” (Accra 18). The church’s kingly office is its faith in and obedience to *God’s* sovereignty (Accra 18), and is manifest in its *prophetic* witness to this truth. This is not too different from Wainwright’s view of the church as “Royal-Servant”, teaching an autonomy-seeking world about the authority, freedom, power and hope of the Servant Lord (Wainwright, 1997:154-8).

## 7. DIMENSIONS OF THE CHURCH

The church’s ministries can also be described according to the four Greek words, *marturia* (witness), *diakonia* (service/mediation), *koinonia* (fellowship) and *leitourgia* (liturgy)<sup>4</sup>. Each of these words denotes a different dimension of the church’s being. As its popularity among practical theologians may suggest (cf. e.g. Burger, 1999:203-260), the locus of the four dimensions of the church is usually the local congregation. This makes them especially suitable for investigating Accra’s vision of the church’s practical response to its public challenges.

### 7.1 Marturia

The discussion above indicated that Accra has a high regard for the church’s witness. However, the word ‘witness’ has two meanings; and both are implied in Accra’s ecclesiology. The first meaning implies ‘seeing’ or ‘recognising’. This corresponds with the WARC’s methodology of “recognition, education, and confession” that produced Accra. This structure continues in the document itself, which first sees and interprets (Accra 6) the “signs of the times” before moving towards confession.

The second meaning of ‘witness’ has to do with ‘speaking’ or ‘giving testimony’. It is embodied by Accra itself as a public “confession” of what the church sees and holds to be true through its faith in the triune God. This second meaning comes to full expression in the confessional part of the document (Accra 15-36) and its call on churches to express *their* own commitment through confession of faith (Accra 38).

### 7.2 Diakonia

In the Reformed tradition *diakonia* is often understood as the active, loving service of the church to those in need (cf. Burger, 1999:245-260)<sup>5</sup>. The focus on those that are in need makes this dimension of the church’s ministry an important category by which to describe Accra’s ecclesiology.

In the confessing part of Accra (15-36) each statement of faith is followed by a “*Therefore...*” (Accra 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31). This implies that witness and confession is not only an end in itself, but also a step on the way to living a different life (Accra 16).

The last section of Accra also suggests a shift towards the diaconal dimension of the church. Paragraph 37 calls on churches “to *work* for justice in the economy and the earth both in our common global context as well as our various regional and local settings.” Paragraph 38 reiterates this sentiment as it urges churches “to translate this confession into *concrete actions*” (my emphasis – HP). Then, paragraph 42 commits the general council “to changing, renewing, and restoring the economy and the earth.”

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4 Cf. the Dutch Reformed Church’s (DRC’s) *Algemene Diensgroep vir Diens en Getuienis*, unpublished and unofficial, progress report viewed at the October 2011 DRC Synod held in Boksburg (4.5-4.10) for a very insightful description of the four dimension’s of the church.

5 Alternatively, Thiselton (2007: 493-5) argues convincingly that the Lukan and Pauline uses of the term denotes that of an office of *mediators* or *ministers* authorised by the apostles to minister the word on a local level, thereby freeing the apostles “for wider public proclamation”. This differs from the typically Reformed interpretation of administering food and funds (2007:494).

Thus, the council itself models the diaconal movement from confession to action to all other manifestations of the church. How such diaconal ministry is to take form in the various manifestations of the church, is however rather vague.

### 7.3 Koinonia

*Koinonia* is often used in ecumenical circles to refer inclusively to the various nuanced understandings of the unity of the church. In this light, unity in Accra has already been discussed under 5.1 above. However, *koinonia* can also refer to the active promotion of authentic fellowship and partnerships.

Such partnership first appears in paragraph 17 where humanity is called to participate in God's creative and redemptive life (cf. also Accra 2, 17, 37, 38 and 41). Thus Accra identifies the church's calling with humanity's calling in general. This theological presupposition later impels the church to partner with those outside its own borders as well (Accra 41).

However, this open spirit is tarnished by the unwillingness to partner with role players in the economic and political spheres of society (cf. Smit, 2009:183). Why does the shared calling of humanity (Accra 17) and the inclusive covenant of God (Accra 20, 22), only translate into partnership with civil society and not with political, judicious and economic institutions (cf. Smit, 2009:183)?

### 7.4 Leitura

The only expression of *leitourgia* in the whole document is the doxology in paragraph 36 (Lk. 1:52f). Does Accra not view worship as a significant part of its ecclesiology? Or could it be that Accra doesn't value *leitourgia* as a valid response to injustice? If it is true that "we have become captivated by the culture of consumerism, and the competitive greed and selfishness of the current economic system" and that "[t]his has all too often permeated our very spirituality" (Accra 35) is it not astounding that no reference is made to the very locus of Reformed spirituality, namely worship?

Worship plays a fundamental role in Reformed ecclesiology and is the unique *locus* of the Christian church: "Dit is die oord, die plek en die tyd, waar die Christelike kerk ontspring" (Smit, 2008a:72). Furthermore, many Reformed theologians today argue that the liturgy, in all its facets, is the heart from which the church's response to social issues is born (cf. Smit, 2008b:101-5 and Smit, 2008c:145-153). Thus, Accra breaks from Reformed ecclesiology for a more activist approach (cf. 4.2 above) and does so with regard to an aspect where the Reformed church may arguably be able to make its most significant contribution to a more just society.

## 8. DULLES'S MODELS OF THE CHURCH

In his influential study *Models of the Church* (1976), Avery Dulles employs a useful typological scheme to distinguish between various ecclesiological models. Dulles subjects each ecclesiology to three standard questions to determine in which model it belongs: 1) what are the bonds that unite the church? 2) Who are the beneficiaries of the church? 3) What is the goal or purpose of the church? The same questions are applied here to Accra's ecclesiology.

### 8.1 Bonds of unity

In Accra the primary bond of unity is the church's shared confession of faith in the triune God (Accra 15, 37). Similarly, for what Dulles calls the herald model, a shared, faithful response to the proclaimed gospel is the uniting element of the church (Dulles, 1976:77). The *ecclesia* image discussed above also plays a pivotal role in the *herald* model (1976:73-4). Therefore, in Accra, as

in the *herald* model, it is a shared confession, but also a *shared calling from God* to the service of God's reign that binds the church together (1976:74).

In some respects, Accra also agrees with the *servant* model's bonds of unity. Paragraph 41, for example, commits the church to work for a just economy with communions and associations beyond its common confession. Thus, while faith is the primary bond in Accra a shared commitment to justice as also an important binding factor (Cf. Dulles, 1976:90-1).

## 8.2 Beneficiaries

When it comes to beneficiaries Accra is most like the *servant* model, where the church's beneficiaries are "all who hear from the church a word of comfort and encouragement, obtain a respectful hearing, or receive material help in times of need" (Dulles, 1976:91). Thus, unlike the other models, its primary beneficiaries are not necessarily members of the church.

Accra shares the servant model's inclusivity by including all people of the world, rich and poor (Accra 17, 30), as possible beneficiaries of the church. With God as its role model (Accra 20, 24), Accra makes special mention of the poor (Accra 20, 28), suffering (Accra 5), powerless (Accra 11), marginalised (Accra 20), victims of injustice (Accra 26), oppressed, hungry, blind, imprisoned, downtrodden, stranger, orphan and widow (Accra 28) as *special* (Accra 24)<sup>6</sup> beneficiaries of the church. More than that, they are included as "preferential partners" of the church - as active participants in God's work (Accra 20). Accra's ecclesiology also follows another more recent (green) ecclesiological development when the benefits of God's reign is said to extend beyond humanity to include the whole of the earth (Accra 1, 5, 20, 22, 26, 37, 42).

In addition to the above, Accra still prioritises proclamation of the gospel so that people may come to faith in Jesus Christ. In this sense Accra agrees with the *herald* model, wherein the beneficiaries of the church "are those who hear the word of God and put their faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour" (Dulles, 1976:78). Therefore, in Accra, the beneficiaries of the church include those who hear the gospel and respond in faith to its call. Such a response seems to include confession of guilt (Accra 34) and repentance from whatever denies fullness of life to God's creation (Accra 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 31).

## 8.3 Goal/Purpose

For Dulles the benefits that people can hope to receive are synonymous with the goal or purpose of the church. Once again, Accra agrees most with the *herald* and *servant* ecclesiological models.

The *herald* model's primary goal is to proclaim the gospel (Dulles, 1976:78). "The Church's responsibility is not necessarily to produce conversion (only God can do that), still less to build the Kingdom of God; but rather to evangelise all the nations in accordance with the 'great commission' of Mt. 28:18-20" (1976:78). Correspondingly, Accra witnesses to God's reign (Accra 32) and calls for repentance (Accra 15-35).

However, Accra also breaks from the herald model in a number of ways: *Firstly*, in terms of the church's "methodology" (1976:86). Statements like, "we are challenged by the cries of the people who suffer and by the woundedness of creation itself," and "we open ourselves to the reality of the world", imply *dialogue* rather than proclamation. This approach is more typical of the servant model, in which the world is a proper theological locus and not simply a passive recipient of the church's witness (1976:85-6).

*Secondly*, Accra shares the servant model's basic assumption of solidarity with the world

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6 Note the similarity between Accra par. 24 and *Belhar*, art. 4. While Accra follows *Belhar* by saying that "God is in a *special* the God of the destitute...", and not the liberation theologians in their "*preferential* option for the poor," one might still ask whether Accra leans more towards the former or the latter? Cf. Smit, 1984.

(1976:85-88), which begins with people that are marginalised, oppressed and powerless (Accra 24-29). Therefore, the church's purpose extends beyond that of an institution, community, sacrament or messenger. The church of Accra is a servant that is called "to stand with those who are victims of injustice", and "against any form of injustice" (Accra 26).

Finally, while Accra gives no indication that the church can bring about God's reign of justice it does place a lot of emphasis on active involvement within the economy (Accra 16, 35). The church is expected "to change, renew and restore the economy and the earth" (Accra 42). For Accra, the church's primary purpose in this context is not to gain new recruits, but to serve people and nature by working for a more just economy (1976:91). This dichotomy between the herald and servant models raises important questions about the relationship between church and eschatology. Does Accra's church simply proclaim the kingdom or does it help to bring it about? Is the ultimate benefactor Jesus, or the Church?

In light of Dulles' models then, Accra's ecclesiology is part *herald* and part *servant*. This also raises questions about the models that do not find expression in the document. Could a stronger *institutional* sensibility not enable the church to relate more clearly with its members and more credibly with others in the public sphere? Could the "mystical communion" model not help to revive the deformed spirituality and lack of empathy that Accra laments? Could the *sacramental* mentality not help to articulate the unique role of the church within the tension between the *already* and the *not-yet*?

## 9. CONCLUSION

The above description of Accra's implied ecclesiology was done in an appreciative manner. The goal was to shed light on the way in which ecclesiological metaphors and images functioned to present a picture of the church within the context of global economic and ecological injustice. It reveals that ecclesiological images and doctrines function in very dynamic ways to convince and create meaning within particular contexts. It is interesting to note, for example, how the challenge of global economic injustice redefines the church's holiness (5.2), or how the prophetic office of the church becomes the preferred mode of relating with the public sphere when "the integrity of our faith" is challenged (6.1)<sup>7</sup>. In other cases important ecclesiological elements such as liturgy (7.4) and the sacraments (4.2) fall away to make room for activist vigour and ecumenical partnerships (7.3). Clearly, the specific contextual challenges facing the general council deeply influenced how they came to view the church<sup>8</sup>.

One way of assessing the church model that emerged from the description above, is by subjecting it to generally accepted, inter-subjective criteria<sup>9</sup>. This enables one to identify certain strengths and weaknesses of the church model, which in turn may be helpful when considering adjustments or alternative proposals. Such inter-subjective criteria would have to include coherence, credibility, intelligibility, relevance, adequacy and continuity with scripture and tradition (Pretorius, 2011:56-62) With some exceptions, like the silence regarding the sacraments, it seems that the Accra Declaration puts forward a coherent image of a church that is willing

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7 Cf. Naudé, P. 2008. What has Accra to do with New York? An analysis of moral discourse in the Accra Confession. *NGTT*, 3-4 (49). p. 206-216.

8 Cf. Smit, DJ. 2008d. Challenges for Reformed Churches in Africa: A Contemporary Narrative, in *International Journal for the study of the Christian Church*, vol. 8, no. 4, November 2008 (330-334).

9 Cf. Chapter 4 of Pretorius, HM. 2011. *The Church in the Accra Declaration: A theological description and critical evaluation of the implied ecclesiology of the Accra Declaration (2004)*. Unpublished Master of Divinity research assignment (University of Stellenbosch). Full text available at: <http://db.tt/6HHq0Z12>.

to address relevant issues from the basis of sound Reformed ecclesiological roots. However, serious questions are raised regarding the credibility and adequacy of Accra's ecclesiology. The credibility of Accra's church model becomes questionable when it is subjected to commonly held ideas regarding society (Pretorius, 2011:66-71). As Smit (2009:183) points out: "The document shows hardly any sensitivity to contemporary forms of structured pluralism and the political, social and cultural complexities of our global world." Furthermore, as the discussion on the *Four Dimensions of the Church* (7) suggests, Accra's practical ecclesiological implications and suggestions are vague, uninspiring and unrealistic (Pretorius, 2011:71-82). It is doubtful whether Accra assists local congregations and ordinary Christians in addressing injustice through the means available to them (Smit, 2009:184).

Ecclesiology offers a good vantage point from which to describe and assess the merits of a church document. When complemented by a more thorough assessment by standard inter-subjective criteria it becomes even more nuanced and helpful. If churches really are "seekers of truth and justice" as par. 11 of Accra suggests, they will look to continually grow in honest self-awareness and work to be more diligent and credible as seekers of Christ's reign of justice.

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**KEY WORDS**

Accra Declaration  
Church  
Ecclesiology

**TREFWOORDE**

Accra Verklaring  
Kerk  
Ekklesiologie

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