It is precisely these elements that have led many to suggest that other ways of thinking about the Church may be far more helpful. One of these is the model of the Church as servant, which focuses upon the mission of God in the world today.

**Church as Servant of the Reign of God**

The servant model of the Church emerged as a specific concept in the 1960s, in several distinct strands of theological literature. The time of the emergence of this model is critical, for this was the period when Christian theology first began seriously to address the end of 'Christendom'. At the heart of the servant model are two crucial theological ideas. The first makes a critical distinction between the Church and the reign of God. In this literature, the Church is not assumed to be identical with the reign of God as the Church had previously imagined, though often without direct awareness. The second idea, to be explained in more detail shortly, is what I have termed 'the Christological analogy', according to which the Church is assigned the same role in relation to God's Kingdom as Jesus assumed, that is, the role of a servant.

To understand the distinction made between God's kingdom and the Church, we must recognize the importance attributed in this period to what was called 'secular' life. The movements that gave rise to the servant model operated from a theological conviction of the value of God's creation and of human culture in general. In contrast to a theological focus on 'other-worldly' ideas of salvation, this theology sees God's purposes in terms of the development of human societies towards justice, peace and the well-being of all who live. Paradoxically, many expressions of this theology spoke of the value of 'secular' culture and life, whilst suggesting that God's purposes related to all the institutions and arenas of human life. Thus, what was regarded as secular, in the sense of 'non-Church', was considered to be the focus of God's purposes in the world. One expression of this vision is Gibson Winter's concept of 'metropolis', which challenges churches to be concerned not only for the 'spiritual' well-being of people but also for freedom and justice in all areas of communal life. Winter's ecclesiology envisages a world in which God gives to every person and group the opportunity to determine their own future in freedom. The task of the Church is not to separate itself from the world but rather to confirm and work for this freedom, encouraging responsibility and maturity in all the institutions of human society. Christian people are thus called to be participants in the life of society, working towards these goals. Winter sees all human institutions, such as the health services, legal system, education and housing programmes, as part of God's saving work in the world. This positive vision of the 'secular' world is what Winter means by 'metropolis', a society in which the urban crises of alienation and isolation are creatively resolved and a genuine community emerges. Thus, for Winter, the mission of the servant Church is not to draw the world into the Church or under its control but rather to engage as a servant of the greater vision, the emergence of the reign of God within the present society.
Winter’s idea of metropolis serves as an illustration of the basic elements of the servant model of the Church, which orientates the life of the Church away from itself and towards the hope of God’s kingdom coming within the present situation. The second principal element in the servant model of the Church concerns a focus on how the Church is to relate to this hope. It is noteworthy that the discussion of the servant model in Dulles, McBrien and Fuellenbach pays no attention to this dimension of the literature. Yet it seems an important ingredient in any effective model of the Church that it should indicate how the basic idea is to be applied. Here the crucial element is ‘the Christological analogy’, which suggests that the servant Church is to model its life and ministry upon the style of Jesus’ own ministry, that is, as a servant.

This idea is most clearly articulated by Colin Williams and J.C. Hoekendijk. Hoekendijk identifies the Christological hymn in Philippians 2 as ‘the Church’s charter’. Here he finds three ‘directional elements’ indicating the broad priorities for the servant Church: self-emptying, service, and solidarity with the people. Similarly, a study of the temptations of Jesus leads Colin Williams to describe the method Christ used in his ministry on earth. Jesus rejects the method of self-assertion: ‘he is baptised on behalf of all men as the suffering servant whose mission it is to save the world by the way of self-effacing, humble servant love’.

These exponents of the servant model find extensive biblical bases for their assertions. This feature of their work contrasts strongly with the assertions of Dulles, McBrien and Fuellenbach, who all see the lack of a clear biblical foundation as one of the weaknesses of the servant model. On the contrary, the Old Testament figure of the ‘servant of the Lord’, applied to Moses, prophets, kings and to the nation Israel itself, and then developed in the ‘suffering servant’ poetry in Isaiah, finds new resonances in the baptismal narratives and the accounts of Jesus’ temptations. Together with some of Jesus’ statements and deeds, not least the foot-washing in John 13, there is here a rich vein of imagery suggesting that the way of God’s action in the world is frequently represented as a servant. Jesus explicitly describes himself in this way and directs his followers to act similarly.

From these two central elements, then, the focusing of the Church away from itself and towards the hope of God’s reign and the designation of the Church as servant of this hope, the servant model is drawn. Williams, Winter and Hoekendijk suggest many practical implications, relating (for example) to the need to have very flexible forms of buildings, which can be easily changed to accommodate changing social needs. Another crucial implication concerns the activities of the ‘lay’ people of the Church. In the servant model, the ordinary people are the front-line troops in the Church’s mission. Their lives, at home, at work, in clubs and groups, are the main focus of the Church’s life. It is in these contexts that the servant Church reaches out for Christ’s presence in the needs and possibilities of situations and communities. Clergy or ministers are seen as ‘auxiliaries’, providing support and perhaps some training or specialist guidance. Nonetheless, the gathered life of the Church, in worship and fellowship, is crucial to the servant model. It is not a case of replacing the gathered Church with the Church dispersed, but rather a new balance of the two.
In its gathered life, in worship, study of God’s word and sacramental celebration, and in the quality of relationship and community practised in the Church, the Church is to be a sign of the reality it hopes for, an indication of the reign of God promised to the whole world.

The servant model of the Church operates with the defining Christian virtue of hope. This model was developed in the heady days of the 1960s missionary vigour for change, with visions of post-war developments, economically and politically, with the Church as a participant in these changes. It draws upon the renewal of eschatology within Christian theology and is an expression of the strong desire to relate the Christian hope to life in the present world. The model also indicates a clear focus upon God’s promised reign as salvation for the world. As such it sees the world as God’s creation, not to be repudiated, but to be loved and served. Implicit in this hope is a vision of God who reaches out to the world, continually offering a kingdom of justice, peace and well-being for all people, not only for the ‘chosen’ few who belong to the Church.

Whereas the servant model draws much of its inspiration from the ‘method’ of Jesus’ ministry, there are other elements in its Christological foundations. One of these is the idea, central to the emerging Liberation Theology, that Christ himself is present in and with those in need, so that the Church is serving Christ when it engages with those who are poor, imprisoned, or in need of justice. Williams speaks of Christ calling the Church from the situations of human need to join him in redemptive mission. Another Christological element in the formulation of the servant model is an idea found in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom Dulles indicates as one of the proponents of this model. It is perhaps more accurate to say that Bonhoeffer’s works provided some of the impetus for the ‘secular’ theology which influenced some of these writers. In his Ethics, Bonhoeffer wrote of Christ taking shape in the world, in the Church as it orientates itself towards the reality of God’s way. Here Bonhoeffer is especially critical of the Church’s institutional tendency to give itself to penultimate concerns, and calls the Church to find its true calling and identity by allowing itself to be shaped according to the way of Christ. What is crucial here – and in some ways this is a particular failing of the servant model – is the suggestion that the Church is to find Christ outside itself: especially in places of need, or in the historic model of Jesus’ own lifestyle, or in the future life of the Church if it allows itself to be shaped according to the way of Christ. The one place where is seems the model does not explicitly see Christ is dwelling in the Church. Perhaps it is simply assumed, with the emphasis placed on other ways of relating to Christ in the world today.

Other criticisms have been made of the servant model of the Church. In addition to the supposed lack of clear biblical foundation, Dulles sees this model as lacking clarity about how the Church relates to the promise of God’s kingdom, with a consequent danger that the servant Church might mistakenly see itself as responsible for inaugurating what only God can do. Fuellenbach sees a related danger, that a stress upon social change ‘can easily lead away from that necessary constant stress
upon personal conversion that the Bible demands. These difficulties suggest that the servant model may not adequately enable the Church to retain its own identity in the world as God's people, called to conversion and to hope in God's way. This difficulty arises, I contend, not from an inherent failing in the model as such, but indicates the need for an adequate balance in its implementation. The service the Church offers is not an end in itself. The servant Church serves God and thus it must always find its way according to the promise and purposes of God's reign. Here there is a crucial need for the servant model to be augmented with an adequate eschatology, enabling the Church continually to discern God's presence and purposes within the machinations of social institutions and human life in general. As Puellenbach rightly suggests, the servant Church needs to retain a focus upon those elements in its identity which are distinct from other agents for social change.

In local churches which seek to follow the servant form, the hope of God's reign needs to be sustained, amidst long years of service and self-giving. This hope depends upon the spiritual life that makes the Church the Church; that is its life in Christ. As already indicated, the Church needs to relate to Christ not only in the past, or in the future, and not only as one who calls the Church from within places of need. In its worship and in its service, the Church needs to relate intimately to the living presence of God. It is this presence that inspires the Church and enables it to practise hope in the form of service in the world. These elements of living in the presence and inspiration of Christ suggest that the servant model of the Church needs a deep grounding in the life of God. Such a grounding is described in the model of the Church as a community, living in divine communion.

The Church as Community

Arguably the image of the Church as a community is particularly suited to our contemporary situation, as people generally seek a new sense of belonging. In western societies especially, there is such a deep sense of fragmentation and alienation that the vision of a community where all may find a home and a sense of identity is indeed attractive. In numerous ways, this quest is expressing itself in forms of Church that focus upon personal relationships.

The community model of the Church is not primarily based on a quest for relationship, however; it is grounded in recognition of relationships that already exist. The imperative to exercise a sense of community arises from the conviction that we are already bound to one another in the community of faith: the Church. Miroslav Volf has explained these dynamics in his description of the 'ecclesiality of the Church'. Those who are alive to faith in Jesus Christ are, already, participants in a community. There may not be ecumenical agreement about the claim that we receive faith from the Church, but Volf says there can be such agreement that we come to faith through the Church. Belonging to a body or group of fellow-Christians is inherent in the very nature of faith. We cannot make ourselves to be a community of faith. It is the Spirit who brings us to faith and it is thus the Spirit who makes us the
Church. These fundamental dynamics of faith also indicate the 'ecclesiality' of the Church: here, there is the primary action of God, through the Spirit, and the responsiveness of the people. Together, these elements constitute the community of the Church. These dynamics are evident most especially in Christian Baptism.

Through Baptism, whose necessary presupposition is faith and accordingly also the will, one is initiated into a two-fold communion – communion with God and a concrete communion with Christians. By wanting to be baptised, I also want to become a part of the Church.21

Baptism immediately brings us into the community of the Church and into the community of God's own life.

The image of the Church as community has two basic levels of meaning, each giving rise to different expressions of this model. The first, which we might call the 'social' expression, emphasizes the quality of relationships between Christians. The stress here is upon mutual support, people engaging in sharing their needs and hopes, and genuine prayerful and loving care for each other. House Churches, formed by five to ten family groups, or small 'community Churches', are one expression of this image of Church. The nurture of 'fellowship' activities within congregational life expresses the same conviction: that the Church is to be a community where people find genuine human acceptance and belonging.

The second basic form of the Church as community emphasizes the mystical or spiritual nature of the community. Here the stress is upon the 'vertical' life of the Church, in communion with God. The Church is seen as a spiritual community, drawn into life with God, and is thus described as the body of Christ, alive to his will, or as the 'people of God' called to obedience to God's word. This image of the Church as community was particularly evident in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and has given rise to further reflection upon the life of the Church. The World Council of Churches document, The Nature and Purpose of the Church: a stage on the way to a common statement, also gives prominence to the idea of the Church as communion and finds significant theological grounding here for communion between the churches.22

There is, however, a more fundamental dimension of the community model of the Church, which seeks to draw together these two expressions and to overcome their weaknesses. Of itself, the 'social' expression of the Church as community runs the risk of making the Church into a religious club of like-minded people, while the 'vertical' or 'mystical communion' idea risks emphasizing the 'invisible' life of the Church in a way that ignores genuine human relationship and participation. More recent thinking about the Church as community has therefore sought to ground this model in trinitarian theology, suggesting that the Church must be a community like the divine community. Miroslav Volf has suggested that this idea has now been so widely accepted that it is seen as virtually self-evident.23 In one expression of it, the Church is seen as an icon of the Trinity.24 In Volf's thought, the Church is to correspond to the divine community, with structures and relationships modelled upon the divine mutuality and perichoresis.
A further development of this proposal, by Paul Fiddes, is critical of the idea of correspondence, arguing that it is inadequate as an understanding of the divine life and of our relationship to it. Instead, Fiddes argues that in faith we participate in the divine community and that the very nature of the language we use here shows that we are already involved in the divine relationships: "the point of trinitarian language is not to provide an example to copy, but to draw us into participation in God, out of which human life can be transformed. But the language of Trinity certainly encourages the values of relationship, community and mutuality between persons."

The model of Church as community is, then, a theological as well as a social image. It means living out, in human relationships, the inherent meaning of our Baptism and our life in the Spirit. The implications of this model can be spelt out quite directly. In the Church as community, first of all, value is placed upon relationships of support and care, characterized by mutuality in difference. Richard McBrien speaks of the responsibility of people in the Church for each other's growth, as human beings in relationship. Secondly, in this community it is recognized that the community of believers is prior to the individual. In trinitarian theology, this is expressed by saying that personhood is constituted by relationship rather than by individuality. We are not first individuals who then choose to enter into relationships; rather, we become individuals within and because of our relationships. So in the Church as community, we may each make a distinctive contribution, but we do so within the communion of relationships which is the Church. These contributions, thirdly, arise from the gifts of the Spirit. The Church as community is a charismatic community, characterized by the gifts received from the Spirit. The relationships within the community are worked out through the exercise of gifts, for proclamation, service, administration, healing and guidance. The exercise of these gifts is offered in mutuality and thus further enhances the life of the community.

Finally, we can say with Volf that the life of the community is both task and hope. The Spirit evokes the hope not only that Christians will live in such mutuality and peace, but that all the world may know such a life in and from God. Thus the exercise of 'community' is not to be a pretence, nor is it to be 'spiritualized' into some invisible or other-worldly sense. Rather, the Church as community is to strive to be in reality what it hopes for in faith.

From this brief outline, we can see that the principal value in the model of Church as community is love, understood as mutuality in giving, in respect and relationship. As already noted, this model of Church draws its inspiration from the trinitarian vision of God as such a community, moving in perichoretic relationship. According to this view, the divine community is constituted by mutually supportive relationships which are also inherently creative. As such the divine life is also the life of the world, holding the world in being, allowing it its distinctive being whilst yet also eternally committed to relationship. The Church, as a part of the created world, is alive to these divine relationships, through the Spirit, and thus knows itself to be a participant in the divine community.