Christians today live in an ecumenical era, struggling to respond creatively to the issues and challenges of the modern world. The church has always sought to be faithful to the gospel in diverse contexts. Today the role or mission of the church is being increasingly redefined in relation to such issues as secularism, social justice, and the question of religious pluralism. Liberation theology, in its ecclesiology, or theological reflection on the church, is contributing to this process of rediscovery by relating the church both to the kingdom of God and to the world in a new and dynamic way.

Most biblical scholars in this century have accepted the judgment that the kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus’ preaching. But, as Albert Loisy remarked in a famous statement, if Jesus preached the kingdom, it was the church that came. This has posed a central problem for ecclesiology, namely, the relation between the church, the world, and Jesus’ mission of inaugurating the reign of God. More broadly, what is the church and what is it for?

This introduction will look at the ways liberation theologians have addressed the question, beginning with a brief review of the origins and central images of the church as recorded in the New Testament before moving on to the emergence and ultimate crisis of “Christendom.” We will then focus on the roots and location of the liberating church, the issue of pluralism, and finally on the question of ministry.

The readings that accompany this introduction to liberation ecclesiology
reflect a wide range of contexts where the church has identified itself with those who are suffering and their struggles for full humanity—in Peru, Brazil, and Mexico, in Malaysia, in the Christian feminist community in the United States, and in South Africa. We will discover that distinctive ways of being a liberating church emerge wherever the church is oriented toward the kingdom of God. To be disciples of Jesus is to respond to the message that in Jesus God has come among us and that the kingdom has come near and been made concrete in the world. This does not mean that the church can be identified with the kingdom. Rather the church belongs “between the times,” between the time when the kingdom of God was proclaimed and took form in Jesus, and the time to come, the fulfillment of that promise of abundant life at the end of all time. As an eschatological or ultimate symbol of liberated existence, the church comes into conflict with privatized faith, with oppressive power, and with exclusivistic theologies. Each essay raises the urgent question: What is the church and who does it stand with today? In dialogue with each voice we are invited and challenged to discern how we might engage that question in our own lives and contexts.

**JESUS AND THE CHURCH’S MISSION**

While Jesus did not intend to found a new religion called Christianity, the early church evolved as a necessary and appropriate development from Jesus’ preaching of the reign of God. We turn to the New Testament to discover the origins of ecclesiology where the church was born at Pentecost with the gift of God’s Spirit. The church always realizes itself in a twofold sense: as an event of God’s grace and as an institution existing to minister in particular historical contexts. What was definitive in shaping the Jesus movement into a new community of faith was the experience of the living presence of the risen Christ after his crucifixion; Jesus had not left his disciples behind but was somehow present among them. What the disciples experienced was the reality Jesus embodied—the kingdom of God, a new way of being together in the world where love and mutual service, rather than hostility and alienation, reigned. As for the original Jesus movement, so for the church today: the criterion is the kingdom of God.

As a first-century Jew, Jesus clarified and embodied what it meant for people to live out their lives under conditions of the reign of God. He preached a radical, alternative understanding of what it meant to be “religious” or “spiritual.” Religion for Jesus meant living in loyalty to God over against all other competing loyalties. God created the cosmos, including humanity as male and female in the image of God, and declared it good; nothing was outside the love of God. Jesus, therefore, came to save the whole world, not just the church. Thus the church is not to exist unto itself but to serve the world in realizing the promise of the kingdom as it is realized in “abundance of life” (Jn 10:11). When Jesus proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom of God, or the *basileia*, he offered an image that
The Church in Solidarity

was basically communal and social. That is, God’s rule called forth a new human community for the whole world based on love, liberation, inclusion, and gratitude.

Jesus gathered disciples who were to carry the good news of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. In Greek *ekklesia* simply means “assembly,” a word which New Testament writers used to designate “those called of God” or “the people or congregation of God.” The kind of people Jesus called into table fellowship were mainly social outcasts. He initiated a kind of radical family life in which whoever does the will of God is a member (Mt 3:3-35). Thus Jesus refused to sanction a separate or restricted idea of the people of God. Rather, he showed that any divisions are between those who do God’s will and those who oppose it. The new community is a people of God open to the presence and action of God—open to the poor, to women and children, to the disabled, to Jews, gentiles, and slaves.

Members of the early Christian community sought to live Jesus’ radical commandment to love God and their neighbors as themselves. “The Way” that he recommended and embodied has been much disputed, but certain features are clearly recognized. Jesus invited people to change their lifestyles, their cultural ethos, and their communities to realize the peace offered by communion with God and neighbor. He spoke to those who were ill or physically maimed, people who saw themselves as invalids or outcasts, and offered them a healing that was social as well as physical or spiritual. To rich people who asked what his teaching meant for them he said they would have to turn their lives around, to change their entire way of relating to others if they were to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus called his closest followers friends. He taught them to honor God as they lived and cared for one another, and he sent them out to do as he did — calling on people to live in concert with the inbreaking of the kingdom of God.

**Biblical Images of Church**

An array of different images of the church can be found in the New Testament; scholars record nearly one hundred. Central among these are the church as the new creation, the body of Christ, and the people of God. These images reflect an understanding of the movement Jesus initiated as inclusive of everyone: lepers, women, tax collectors, prostitutes, the sick and injured, Samaritans, and other social and religious outcasts; all were included in his circle of friends and disciples. One joined this open-ended and inclusive circle by professing the radical commitment to follow Jesus, by being baptized in God’s name, and by participating in the eucharist.

This authentically new creation is described by the apostle Paul as something that happens in history: “When anyone is united in Christ, there is a new act of creation; the old order has passed away, and a new order has begun” (2 Cor 5:17). The good news of being accepted as we are by God is envisioned in this understanding of church as new creation, a community
of inclusive participation and effective purpose for the redemption of
the world.

Another significant image used for the church in the New Testament
period is the body of Christ: “For just as the body has many members, and
all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with
Christ. For by one Spirit we were baptized into one body —Jews or Greeks,
slaves or free . . . Now you are Christ’s body, and each of you a limb or
organ of it” (1 Cor 12:12, 27). In other words, the community of Jesus’
disciples is called into relationships of mutual honor and accountability —not a
hierarchy based on power and domination, but a cooperative sharing of talents
and spiritual gifts toward the creation of an integrated, healed, and whole body.
This understanding speaks of the importance of diversity, of the way
people at different stages of Christian faithfulness can contribute different
gifts for the sake of the kingdom. Whether it was new creation, the body of
Christ, or the people of God, the early church struggled to remain
faithful to God and a vision of the whole world’s salvation, praying “Thy
Kingdom Come.”

The church arises out of this proclamation and organizes itself in terms
of the priorities of the kingdom. To participate in the cause of the
kingdom, then, the church worships God and works for the historical
liberation of the whole people of God. There will always be a tension
between the church and the kingdom, because they can never be equated.
This tension remains a source of prophetic critique within the church and
a source of renewal, as each generation of Christians wrestles with the
call to be a sign and instrument of the reign of God for the sake of the world.

CHRISTENDOM AND ITS CRISIS

Gradually, by the end of the first century, the church found its faith had
shifted from proclaiming the coming of the kingdom to proclaiming Jesus
as the Christ. The immediate expectations for the return of Christ were
eventually projected onto Christ’s future return. This shift in vision,
combined with historical factors, led the way toward the era of
Christendom. Here the church understood itself as the sole vehicle of the
reign of God. The world, therefore, was to be christianized and contained
by the church as the only means of salvation.

In the Nicene Creed of 325 C.E. we find the classic marks of the church:
“We believe in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” Within the
mentality of Christendom, it was thought that there were only two kinds
of people: those who had accepted faith in Christ and those who had
rejected it. Because the church regarded itself as the exclusive mediator of
salvation, it saw no problem in furthering its own life and teachings in
alliance with civic power. It thus pursued a form of mission whereby the
church, understood as a self-enclosed entity set apart from the world, was
to incorporate the rest of society into its realm.
What gave force to this perspective was the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine and the edict of 381 C.E. which established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. As the church developed into a powerful institution over the next twelve centuries, the credal marks of true church were operative amidst diverse historical contexts. They functioned to safeguard unity, in the sense of uniformity, since there was “no salvation outside the church”; catholicity, as the proper name of the one and same official church identified as Roman Catholic and planted all over the (known) world; holiness, understood in terms of orthodox piety; and apostolicity, in the sense of the succession of bishops founded on a direct link with the first apostles.

While challenging the abuses of medieval Christianity, neither the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century nor the Counter-Reformation within the Catholic church, dislodged the premise of Christendom, namely, that the world lacked any autonomous or authentic reality outside its relationship to the church. Thus, despite the splitting of Christendom into many Christian groups, the ecclesiocentric perspective of Christendom remained intact: to be for or against the church meant to be for or against Christ. In the words of the famous formula, already cited, outside the church there was no salvation.

With the advent of the modern age, this mentality came under gradual assault. Secular philosophers of the Enlightenment began to explain the world in purely rational terms without reference to divine reality and they recommended remaking society in accordance with this rational principle. No longer was Christendom’s message and means of salvation accepted as the only or best one; instead, the triumphalistic attitude of the church was challenged by the modern claim that autonomous reason, independent from the church’s authority and applied to human problems in history, could emancipate society from its misery.

For the Catholic church, the most significant and creative response to the challenges of the modern age came with the Second Vatican Council convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962. The first general council in almost a century, and only the second since the Reformation, Vatican II gave profound new direction to the self-understanding of the church.

The Council significantly modified the traditional stance of the church toward the world and modernity. Abandoning the attitude of triumphalism and arrogance that had characterized previous church documents, the Council spoke warmly of such principles as freedom of conscience, democracy, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the advance of justice and human rights in modern history. Holiness demanded participation in the constructive process of history; the identity of the church was to be redefined in terms of openness to the world for the healing of the total social order. Vatican II asked Christians to engage themselves in social action, and criticized purely individualistic responses. The Council recognized the
The biblical model of the church as People of God, emerged as a new image at the Council. This image, which highlighted the equality of all Christians in baptism, supplanted previous, more clerical and institutional models of the church, and made possible a deeper expression of solidarity with the entire human family, all called to be people of God. Instead of emphasis on the separation between the church and the world, one vocation was affirmed: the calling to all people to grow, unfold, and be self-determining under the influence of divine grace.

The Second Vatican Council has been described appropriately as opening up the windows and letting fresh air into the church. It clearly distinguished the church from the kingdom of God while at the same time identifying the church with the work of the kingdom in and for the world. This shift was new and exciting. At the same time, however, many of the Council’s insights tended to reflect the values and perspectives of the dominant Western middle-class church. In its positive and optimistic view of history and modernity the Council was less successful in reflecting the experience and struggles of the world’s poor.

One cause of the Council’s limitations was the fact that it had left out too many voices, particularly those of women and the poor. Nevertheless, the direction established by Vatican II was toward a new global identity for the church. It was based on another new image of the church as sacrament, that is, a visible sign and instrument of salvation in Christ through the Holy Spirit. This image placed the church within the horizon of salvation but not as its sole vehicle. The image of the church as sacrament opened up the mission of the church to encountering God in history wherever people, whether Christian or non-Christian, were engaged in advancing the kingdom vision, characterized by communion with God and unity among men and women. This reality contributed a foundation to the emergence of liberation theology.

LOCATION OF THE LIBERATING CHURCH: SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR

The church in liberation theology functions not at the center of the world but, as Gustavo Gutiérrez insists, “uncentered,” in solidarity with all those who are marginalized. Recent decades have seen the rebirth of the church in its orientation to work with God for the healing and liberation of the world. Among the most compelling signs of the rebirth of the church are found today in Christian communities of the destitute, of indigenous, impoverished, black, and third world peoples, and also in ecumenical movements in solidarity with them. This liberating church encourages Christians to move away from Christendom’s tendency to reduce salvific action to the church alone and thus to be preoccupied with the status and security of...
the church itself. Instead, the church must move out of the center of attention in order to immerse itself in the broader plan of salvation, the reign of God intended for the whole world.

A new idea of church has developed wherein Christian communities reform traditional church structures and forms of ministry on the basis of kingdom principles witnessed in the early Jesus movement. This model of church accepts that unity cannot be based simply on the structures themselves but on the basis of discipleship. In its commitment to continuing on the “Way” of radical discipleship, the church becomes the people of God, the people called to incarnate God’s love for the world in history. Liberation theologies have built on the theological conviction that God is at work in the world, as well as in the church, and that the church’s mandate is to recognize the kingdom of God both among us and before us, as both already and not yet fulfilled, already known and tasted, and yet still to come in fullness. It is in this “in-between” time that the church finds its mission.

The church in liberation theology is rooted in a faith in God and an option for the poor. The suffering of the poor is a sign of everything that contradicts the will of God in history, for their suffering is not simply a matter of accident. It is in large part due to the way the world’s resources are controlled. A liberating church recognizes a network of domination and oppression that functions around the world to stifle freedom and keep the majority of human beings from meaningful work and participation in shaping their destinies according to God’s good creation. Because the salvation present in Jesus Christ includes the liberation of people from every dehumanizing condition, social structures that promote domination by some at the expense of others is an injustice, a form of social sin.

Theologically, the church learns the meaning of the fact that God’s covenant is with all God’s people when it hears the cry of the poor. The Word of God is addressed to every human being and God’s intention is for all to be co-creators in love of God and neighbor. No one is excluded from this kingdom vision. The presence of the poor is a sign of the inclusiveness of God’s care. The poor, therefore, evangelize the whole world because God’s approaching reign, offered especially to them, expresses most fully the meaning of God’s love: those at the bottom of the social structure realize the grace of being accepted for who they are, not for what they own or possess. As the gospel proclaims God’s judgment on human sin and God’s promise of new life, so a church of the poor committed to the gospel of love and justice will stand against relations of domination, exploitation, and oppression. Thus, a church of the poor does not offer a vague universal approach to helping the poor with aid while ignoring poverty. It is not a church for the poor. Nor is it merely a part of the wider church which coexists with equal rights within it. Rather, it is a church whose life, identity, and mission are radically determined by the presence of the poor, and their struggles, anxieties, and hopes.

For middle-class Christians the call to the church becomes in a new way
a call to conversion and solidarity. For a liberating church follows a double commitment to the poor: to look at society from the perspective of the victims and to express solidarity with them in public action. The operative vision of this model of church is the promise of “a land flowing with milk and honey” wherein God’s kingdom will come, God’s will of redemption will be done, including the liberation of people from conditions of oppression. In this way the church’s solidarity is with the entire human community, but particularly with the poor and marginalized, as God calls it into the world as friend and servant.

THE CHURCH IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD

The church in liberation theology embraces a mission to oppose sin and celebrate the gift of life in both church and world. That the gospel is intended for everyone, however, does not imply that everyone is meant to belong to the Christian church. It does mean that we are called to become a people of God and that as we come to define our own identity in relation to the poor we must simultaneously make room for the self-defining identities of others with whom we share the world. A liberating church repents of its long history of treating other faiths and ideologies as the enemy, as inferior, as unworthy of dialogue. The ecumenical movement of the twentieth century has awakened the church to define itself differently, this time in dialogue with the ecumenical aspirations of other faith communities.

As we have seen, the church in our time lives in a post-Christendom world. That is, the church can no longer assume its position as the “sacred canopy” of the social order. In the midst of religious pluralism, the church can become “holy” to the extent that it actualizes through worship and action the reconciliation of humanity with God. It can become “one” by embracing its true ecumenical mission to transform dehumanizing social systems and relations into ones that reflect dignity, friendship, and justice as the fullest expressions of love. It can become “apostolic” by empowering the laity and entering into solidarity with suffering humanity. It can become “catholic” by giving up any imperialistic tendencies and cooperating with respect for religious differences, especially in the struggles for social justice.

The church which pursues a liberating option around the world may indeed be a minority, but the Bible offers abundant witness to the power of things that are seemingly small and insignificant. The community of faithful, according to the parables of Jesus in Matthew 5:13-16 and Luke 13:18-21, is compared to yeast or salt or light in the world. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, tenacious, productive, vulnerable. These images encourage the church to honor the mystery of God as well as the multiplicity of cultures and communities, to envision a church that is called by God to be open to the Spirit that blows where it wills (Jn 3:8).

The criterion for identifying the “true” church remains the kingdom of God. The church arises out of this proclamation and organizes itself in that
direction, uncentered in relation to the world and human history. The task of a church which seeks liberation is to bear the burden of suffering with other people, to struggle with others, whether Christian or not, for greater justice, and to strengthen the bonds that unite people, despite differences in religion, culture, and racial origin, and in doing so to become a sign of God’s grace in the world.

All of this has profound implications for the understanding of ministry in the church. Traditionally, the understanding of Christian ministry in the church has been defined by Jesus’ three designations as prophet, priest, and king. Maria Harris, in her book, *Fashion Me a People*, puts an interesting spin on these different vocations. She suggests that the church has a prophetic vocation in the ministries of justice and concern for others. It has a priestly vocation in the ministries of healing, blessing, teaching, and remembering. And it has a political vocation to shape and reshape the forms of church and public life so that all are welcome. Shared among a church with a popular base, these ministries function together for pastoral empowerment, to develop a fresh awareness of the people’s own resources for ministry, and to create a whole people of God at work to incarnate God’s love and justice in a suffering world.

**PREVIEW OF OUR TEXTS**

The following readings have been chosen to illustrate a range of the ecclesial struggles and signs of hope in our world. The first selection by Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez describes the “uncentering” of the church as the process of recognizing the church as a sacrament of salvation, the efficacious sign and instrument of God’s grace in the world. The idea of church as sacrament, heralded at Vatican II, indicates also that the church exists for the world, and not the world for the church, as in Christendom. Gutiérrez shows how this has ushered in a radically new understanding of church, one that firmly grounds the eschatological vision of the coming kingdom in history.

A global movement in the church is discovering anew what it means to be church, how to be the place where God’s purposes for freedom and love become visible in history. For Gutiérrez the church is, therefore, a “sacrament of history.” As a sign of God’s saving presence in the world, the church must denounce and withdraw its support from all social systems of oppressive power, while simultaneously announcing and orienting itself toward the coming of God’s reign, where community, justice, and freedom manifest in history God’s love and purpose for the world.

The second selection by Dominique Barbé from Brazil describes the elements that have created the church base communities. These groups are essentially the church of poor people in rural areas and in marginal districts of urban centers. Throughout Brazil there are some 80,000 base Christian communities. Barbé outlines how a church base community is formed...
and what its tasks are, especially in a situation of oppression.

The roles of priests and the laity in this context are related to the scriptural understanding of Jesus’ followers as agents of the kingdom of God. The base communities have nurtured thousands of ministries over the years in building up the mission of the church. In this essay, stages of creating a base Christian community are discussed: living together by sharing in a common community as friends; joining together in prayer; restoring a voice to the people by having them tell stories of their deepest needs and hopes; moving toward collective action for freedom, in the neighborhood, in popular movements, and in broader actions designed to create participatory social structures. Barbé affirms the nature of base Christian communities as places for celebrating the faith and strengthening communal resolve to transform the world.

In our next selection, Maria Pilar Aquino comments on the contributions of women to the base Christian community movement. A Roman Catholic theologian originally from Mexico and now working in Hispanic ministries in California, she adds a much needed voice to the struggle of the church for justice. In light of the presence of the poor that has renewed the church’s mission and identity, Pilar Aquino discusses specific needs and demands of oppressed women. Because women are the backbone of the church, the option for the poor is an option for women. This essay describes how women in base Christian communities enable the church to be an authentic agent of life for the poor, the majority of whom are women. In particular, the church is challenged by women to repent of its sexism, which thwarts women’s gifts and wisdom, and to function as a sanctuary for those in need of protection under conditions of repression and persecution.

The fourth selection is by a Malaysian Protestant, Yong Ting Jin, who has worked in Hong Kong as the Asia-Pacific Regional Secretary of the World Student Christian Movement. This essay is written from the perspective of women and challenges the church to consider how the church has lost its true essence. She deals not only with the oppressive features of the church, but also with how it is liberating for women when it responds to their challenges and contributions. She urges the church to be faithful by practicing inclusiveness—in new lifestyles, ecumenical work, a new exercise of power, and a new way of doing theological reflection amidst church involvement in the various dimensions of the people’s struggle.

In our fifth essay Mary Hunt, a Catholic theologian and co-director of Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual in Washington, D.C., continues with the theme of women and the church. Hunt describes the nature of the movement known as “women-church.” Women-church initially developed in North America and Europe as Christian women have struggled for self-identity, survival, and liberation in a patriarchal society and church. When women confront the inequality and rejection they experience on the basis of their gender, and when they experience God’s sustaining grace and liberating presence in the midst of their struggles for
justice, freedom, and wholeness for all, women-church is born. Hunt discusses women-church as global, ecumenical, feminist base communities of justice-seeking friends who engage in ritual, sacrament, and solidarity.

The sixth and final selection comes from Charles Villa-Vicencio, a white anti-apartheid activist and professor of religious studies at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Villa-Vicencio was interviewed by Jim Wallis, the editor of Sojourners magazine, about the reality of the church in South Africa. In the past some churches endorsed apartheid, the majority adopted a reformist stance, with only a minority of others actively siding with the anti-apartheid struggle. Villa-Vicencio believes that the church will not really confront the state until such time as the church has rediscovered itself.

At the time of the essay’s publication, the author was acutely aware that the churches were divided. Since then, significant developments have taken place in South Africa, including the release of Nelson Mandela and the establishment of multi-racial coalitions and consultations to move toward reconstruction. However, Villa-Vicencio criticizes the churches that protest but do not translate church statements into political action. Like all churches in contexts of poverty and oppression, the situation of conflict is generating a transformation of the church. Hope for the church in South Africa lies in its becoming a liberating church, “not only in solidarity with the poor, but a church of the poor — allowing, enabling, and empowering the poor to take control of the church and to be church, giving it identity, giving it a program, and giving it direction. That’s the challenge facing the churches.”

The following essays introduce a range of images appropriate for a liberative ecclesiology: the church as sign and sacrament of God’s grace in the world, as church base community, as sanctuary, as a redemptive community, as women-church, and as agent of God’s liberation. In a pluralistic and struggling world, we badly need such an abundance of images.