



Models of Church

What does “Church” mean: Is it the building or place of worship? Is it the pope, bishops or priests? Is it the people of God serving the poor? To categorically and totally define Church is a difficult task. From the 1970’s, leading scholar Avery Dulles presented a number of ‘models’ of Church to encapsulate the essence of Church:

- Church as **institution**: this model focuses on the structures and leadership positions in the Church – pope, bishops, priests - that support the administration of Church affairs. It is very clear on the identity of the Church and reflects many years of tradition. Its limitations are that it is inward-focussed and not outreaching, it can breed clericalism (a belief that a formal position in the Church entitles one to have power or undue influence over others) and tends to be hierarchical, with a ‘top-down’ distribution of power.
- Church as **communion**: this model highlights relationships – relationships between members of the Church and the relationship between members and Christ. Two strong images encapsulate this model – the Church as the Body of Christ and the Church as the People of God. This model has strong scriptural connections and reflects the original ‘house churches’ of the fledgling Christian community. The limitations of this model include a lack of clarity in its identity and mission and the danger of it simply being a social connection between people.
- Church as **sacrament**: this model defines Church as the visible sign of (*sacrament*) Christ. The Church not only continues the work of Christ in the world but is his visible presence. This model highlights the sacramental and liturgical elements of the Church as actions of Christ in and through the church community
- Church as **herald**: The focus for this model of Church is quite clear – it is to be an evangelizing Church; one that receives the Word of God and passes it on. Church administration, official teaching and liturgy are secondary to the proclamation of the word of God and the invitation to respond. This model is faithful to the mission of the early disciples but can be monological in its invitation to faith, insensitive to the context of people’s lives.
- Church as **servant**: This model promotes Jesus’ example of washing his disciple’s feet; to be a servant to the world. It situates the Church very much in the world, attentive to the signs of the time and responsive to its needs.

It is important to note that not one model dominates what it means to be Church. Each of them contributes to a fuller understanding of Church and in isolation, each has it’s own limitations.