

# Religion and Social Justice: A Critical Analysis of the South African Council of Churches in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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## Abstract

Within the South African context, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) played a constructive role in the formation of a democratic society. The SACC was the united voice of the church, and its relationship with civil society made it a major role-player in the dismantling of apartheid and the establishment of democratic rule. While post-apartheid is a time of hope and achievement, the country is facing serious social injustices more than two decades into democratic rule. This shift from apartheid to democracy has resulted in a different relationship between church and state. The relationship between church and state has moved from antagonism and polarisation during the apartheid era to “critical solidarity,” and finally to “critical engagement.” This paper will analyse and evaluate the role of the ecumenical church for social justice in post-apartheid South Africa. It will investigate the reasons for the presumed turning point in the relationship between the church and the state, the impact that the relationship between the church and state has on the role of the church, as well as the contribution the church can make to social justice issues, with particular reference to those at the margins of society.

**Keywords:** South African Council of Churches (SACC); social justice; development; Rustenburg Declaration; agency; ecumenism

## Introduction

The social justice role of the church has come under scrutiny in the twenty-first century. Social justice concerns the role of social, political, and familial institutions in promoting liberty for all citizens. The underlying principle is that the ordering of society and the structure of institutions should foster equal opportunities and basic rights for all its

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citizens. Rights—such as economic, property, and political rights—and freedom collectively amount to the minimum form of justice. Social justice assumes that free and rational persons, concerned with the fostering of their own interests, should accept from an initial position of equality the terms of their association. According to Rawls, it is these principles that form the basis of governments and other forms of cooperation (justice as fairness) (Rawls quoted in Johnson and Reath 2004, 334–335). Nozick (1974), a libertarian, differs somewhat from Rawls, and propagates that individuals are ends in themselves, and therefore have rights that must be respected by society. The concept of “rights over oneself” is referred to as self-ownership. In other words, what I produce with my talents is mine. It is, however, only unrestricted capitalism that recognises self-ownership. These two notions of social justice emphasise the role of institutions and structures as centre spaces of freedom and rights for all citizens.

Global justice issues—such as migration, environmental degradation, human rights abuses, sectarian violence, economic and political cynicism—ask questions about the pragmatism of identity, ecological preservation, human rights, human dignity, and just economic and political practices. Globally, there has been a resurgence of the centrality of the function of religion in personal and societal matters. The ongoing violent attacks by religious extremists, the radical conservatism that excludes those who are different, and the explosion of migration have brought the church into new relationships with the rest of civil society, political policies, and worldviews.

In recent history, there have been examples of the church becoming a national symbol of mourning and reconciliation in societies affected by indiscriminate violent attacks. In these cases, the church has played a pastoral and reconciliatory role.<sup>1</sup> In societies where migration has confronted issues of national and local identities, the church is playing a mediatory role, and in societies where communities have been excluded based on race and religion, the church has played a prophetic role.<sup>2</sup> These different roles represent the embodiment of the church and the relationship that the church has with the rest of civil society and political communities.

Challenges facing the church in Africa include ethnic and religious conflict, poverty, environmental exploitation, and economic disparity, to mention a few. The continent has a high percentage of religious affiliation among its inhabitants and a long tradition of the ecumenical church in Africa. For instance, the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) has been tackling problems such as racism, poverty, and ethnic conflict. In

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1 Oslo Cathedral was a symbol of reconciliation after the killing of 85 youths by the extremist, Anders Behring Breivik in 2011.

2 The Berlin City Mission Church has a comprehensive and inclusive approach to integrate immigrants into the mainstream structure of society. They are situated near the old Berlin Wall, connecting poor and very affluent communities. They are also very close to the main government buildings, which is the political home of the government.

spite of their efforts, there is no clear sign that the atrocities that thwart social justice, are diminishing.

Within the South African context, the South African Council of Churches (SACC) played a constructive role in the formation of a democratic society. The SACC was the united voice of the church, and its relationship with civil society made it a major role-player in the dismantling of apartheid and the establishment of democratic rule. While post-apartheid is a time of hope and achievement, the country is facing serious social injustices more than two decades into democratic rule.<sup>3</sup> This shift from apartheid to democracy has resulted in a different relationship between church and state. The relationship between church and state has moved from antagonism and polarisation during the apartheid era, to “critical solidarity,” and finally, to “critical engagement.”

This paper will analyse and evaluate the role of the ecumenical church for social justice in post-apartheid South Africa. It will investigate the reasons for the presumed turning point in the relationship between the church and the state, the impact that the relationship between the church and state has on the role of the church, as well as the contribution the church can make to social justice issues, with particular reference to those at the margins of society.

## **Ecumenical Church and Development**

The ecumenical church plays an important role in civil society. The ecumenical church and its relationship with the rest of society take on different forms, from local co-operation between churches to international affiliations. This paper regards the SACC as a “notion of church” because its boundaries are situated in both the local and international ecumenical movements. The word “ecumenical” takes on many different forms. Conradie (2013) summarises the word in “23 agendas.”<sup>4</sup> While all 23 agendas are relevant within the ecumenical discourse, my reference to the ecumenical church is situated within agenda 11 (church and society). Conradie (2013, 36) rightly notes that “One may, therefore, detect a tendency in ecumenical engagements to focus on what may be called the social agenda of the church. This is undoubtedly the case in the South

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3 The widening gap between the rich and the poor, the unprecedented high level of service delivery protests, and corruption amongst political leaders, are some examples of social injustices.

4 The 23 agendas include: 1) Oikumene (the whole inhabited world); 2) catholicity; 3) the seven councils; 4) the conciliar movement amidst major ecclesial schisms; 5) mission and evangelism; 6) faith and order; 7) life and work; 8) ecumenical theological education; 8) worship and liturgy; 10) ecumenism from above; 11) church and society; 12) ecclesiology and ethics; 13) dialogue with other faiths; 14) wider ecumenicity; 15) the household of God as the global political economy; 16) the planetary household; 17) the universe story; 18) return to Nicene Christianity; 19) bilateral conversations on matters of faith and order; 20) belonging to Christian world communions within confessional traditions, as ad hoc collaboration; 21) inter-denominational reform and deform movements; 22) ecumenism as ad hoc collaboration; and 23) inclusive ecumenical structures (Conradie 2013, 18–66).

African context, given the involvement of especially the SACC in the struggle against apartheid.”

The SACC has a long history of engagement with social issues, which extends well beyond the mainline denominations that are officially affiliated members. In recent history, the ecumenical church has taken prominence amongst the local churches, churches affiliated by common theological persuasions, denominations in formal membership, and the worldwide ecumenical movement. The SACC is well situated within these different affiliations. Its programmes have been embedded in the local churches, and it is in dialogical relationships with the National Initiative for Reformation in South Africa (NIRSA); the Southern Africa Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA); African Enterprise; The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA); and the World Council of Churches (WCC).

With regard to the social agenda of the church, three gatherings of the WCC can be highlighted. In 1966, the World Conference on Church and Society in Geneva debated the different notions of development. Development was described as diverse as charity, social transformation, and systematic political ordering of society. These diverse notions of development, as the church’s role in society, were influenced by the economic disparity between countries in the South and that of the North. The dominance of the economic aspect of development in the debate was evident at Uppsala 1968, and development was effectively equivalent to greater GNP. Conradie (2013, 37) asserts that the world ecumenical gathering in Geneva 1966 was held “amidst the ‘rapid social change’ that characterised the decolonisation process, nation building, issues around socio-economic development and industrialisation.” In 1968, the SACC was established, and it is no surprise that “The WCC central committee mandated the establishment of a Programme to Combat Racism (PCR) in 1969. The focus of this struggle for an inclusive society was very much on apartheid in South Africa” (Conradie 2013, 37). An immediate response by the SACC to the Programme to Combat Racism was the publication of the *Message*. The *Message* challenged the racial segregation of the apartheid policy. It challenged the false identities that were rooted in race rather than common humanity. The social implications of the *Message* were summarised under five biblical principles. The five principles included: 1) the agency of Christians; 2) an interest in and responsibility for life; 3) participation in social transformation; 4) stewardship; and 5) humans created in God’s image (Solomons 2018, 124). This is the earliest indication that the SACC had a strong motivation towards responsibility for development in its social justice concerns.

At the 1970 WCC conference in Montreux, the development agenda shifted from an exclusive focus on economics to a three-pronged approach that included self-reliance and social justice. This gave rise to a joint exploratory venture by the WCC, the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace (SODEPAX), and the Commission on the Churches’ Participation in Development (CCPD). Human development through social justice, self-reliance and economic growth, replaced exclusive economic development

based on technological advancement and industrialisation (Klaasen 2015, 330). Social justice was further entrenched as the means of development in 1975 in Nairobi. Commodities—as the only means of production—were rejected and human capabilities took centre stage. Institutional structures had to change, and value-based economics replaced economic growth at all cost. “This new emphasis in the development debate elevated distribution above production and in an even more damning manner described real distribution to be egalitarian” (Klaasen 2015, 330). The new emphasis, and especially the notion of participation, shifted the focus away from exclusively economic to ethical and political indicators (Swart 2006, 45–46).

The SACC—through its membership of the WCC, the contextual issues that confronted the church, and the influential leadership role by church leaders such as Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu (as General Secretary of the SACC)—was the mouthpiece for the poor and marginalised. Prior to 1994, the SACC was a strong and influential ecumenical church affiliation that represented those excluded from the centre because of their position as the marginalised. The SACC embraced liberation theology, especially black theology. “It had a strong sense of purpose and direction embedded in an authentic prophetic voice of the oppressed and voiceless. It provided a space for worship and home for the oppressed. It was seen as an instrument and beacon of hope” (Pillay 2017, 2). The SACC embodied the space of the poor and marginalised at the centre. The existential position of the poor and their experiences constituted the power relations between church and state.

## **The Rustenburg Declaration 1990**

In many ways, the Rustenburg Declaration 1990 was the turning point of the social agenda of the SACC. Influential theologians, such as Frank Chikane and Desmond Tutu, were instrumental in the shift that the SACC was to take. This shift cannot be separated from what was happening in Africa, and one can draw parallels between the SACC and the AACC. At about the same time as the Rustenburg Declaration 1990, the AACC, under the presidency of Desmond Tutu, had a ground-breaking conference in Harare. In his annual report, Jose Belo Chipenda (the general secretary of the 6th assembly) singled out Tutu as the most influential factor in the AACC. Chipenda claimed that Tutu had saved the organisation from bankruptcy and put the organisation back on course towards its prophetic role (AACC 1994, 10). In both the SACC and AACC, the progression/regression of the development debate was from a linear movement of the South receiving from the North, with a special focus on technological and economic advancement, to programmes and social transformation, and eventually social justice. In both the SACC and the AACC, programmes and not processes were emphasised. Despite the valuable contribution that the AACC in Harare 1992 made to the social justice debate in South Africa, it did not go far enough to criticise the “modernisation approaches” and “dependency theories” by the North in favour of the “emerging people-centred approach” (Klaasen 2017, 12). The SACC, as centre space for the poor and marginalised, found itself in a compromising position in its relationship with the state.

The Rustenburg Declaration 1990 embodied a preparation for the transitional period from apartheid to a democratic state. The declaration made several references to “time of transition”; “threshold of new”; and “new society” (Rustenburg 1990), which indicates the envisioned post-apartheid society. The church was revisiting its own mission within the South African context and realised that its role had to shift from the prophetic to a theology of reconstruction. The theology of reconstruction—by theologians such as Jessi Mugambi, Alan Boesak, and Charles Villa-Vicencio—became the theological justification for the role of the church in society. The Rustenburg Declaration 1990 affirms the church’s role as agency of social justice by denouncing apartheid as a sin and condemning the discriminatory laws as unjust. It further affirms the role of the church to seek justice through compassion and co-responsibility. This affirmation, coupled with the re-affirmation that the relationship between the church and state is influenced and determined by the church’s notion of humanity as created in the image of God, is one of the most significant outcomes of the declaration. This paper contends that the outcome “humanity created in the image of God”—although it was professed in almost creedal form and as indispensable to the functionality of the church—has not been taken seriously enough as the root of the development debate.

Solomons (2018) identifies the weaknesses of the Rustenburg Declaration 1990 as the start of the end of the influence of the church in the social agenda of South Africa. This is further worsened by the degree of compromise of divergent views and persuasions that made the declaration less prophetic than previous attempts prior to the 1990s. Developments outside the ecumenical church also contributed to the decrease of influence of the SACC (Solomons 2018, 182). The SACC, as an ecumenical church, lost its common identity and its “clear theological rationale and ecumenical vision.” Most importantly, the SACC lost its grass-roots involvement and marginalised itself from the poor. Pillay (2017, 2) asserts that “One would have imagined that after 1994, the SACC would have continued to play a role in the reconstruction and development of South Africa, especially in building and sustaining the democracy of the country. However, after 1994, the SACC is described as a weaker organisation.”

Instead of continuing with its prophetic role, the ecumenical church almost disintegrated. Influential church leaders, such as Frank Chikane, Brigalia Bam, Alan Boesak and Molefe Tsele, joined the state in different capacities, and this influenced the relationship between state and church. How possible was it to be prophetic from within the formal structures of the state?

## **SACC Post-apartheid**

The early stages of post-apartheid South Africa also provided a context for the more antagonistic relationship between (ecumenical) church and state. The approach of the SACC shifted from “critical solidarity” to “critical engagement.” The ruling party within the government responded by alienating the SACC. This response did not only alienate the SACC, but the adverse effect was the uncritical relationship between the ruling party and a “more conservative alliance of Evangelical, neo-Pentecostal,

charismatic and African Instituted Churches” (Conradie 2015, 64). This resurgence towards a more conservative partnership of “non-mainline churches was not too difficult, considering the divergent approaches to mission by the two different movements.

On the one hand, the mainline churches (which make up the SACC) have a tradition of mission that is situated within the development debate. The non-mainline churches regard mission as evangelization” (Conradie 2015, 66). The latter perspective of mission has been the dominant approach by churches within and outside the post-apartheid SACC. Pillay (2017) asserts that the SACC was not theologically prepared for social and political change. It had no pastoral plan, theological rationale or ecumenical strategy to deal with the reconstruction and development of a new society. Instead, when “liberation came, some church leaders seemed to withdraw from political involvement and attended to the institutional needs of the church” (Pillay 2017, 2).

Another factor that influenced the SACC’s social agenda was the establishment of various ecumenical initiatives outside the borders of the SACC. Ecumenical bodies, such as the National Initiative for Reformation in South Africa (NIRSA) and the Southern African Leadership Assembly (SACLA)—that were supported by African Enterprise and The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA), The National Religious Leaders Forum (NRLF), and the National Religious Association for Social Development (NRSARD)—filled the void left by the SACC. Notwithstanding the alliances that these bodies formed with the ruling party under the leadership of Mandela, Mbeki, and Zuma respectively, the tension between and in the different bodies was detrimental to both the SACC and the social agenda of the church. These bodies were not established by church leaders or church forums, but by political leaders who sought uncritical support for their political agenda. It is evident in the criticism that the SACC levelled against the government and former president Jacob Zuma regarding e-tolls and the apology that the president offered for bringing the country’s economy into disrepute by firing the minister of finance in 2015 (Pillay 2017, 4). Conradie (2013, 15) asserts: “It is at least evident from these rather confusing developments that the relationship between church, party, government and state calls for constant clarification. Many churches that supported the liberation movement in South Africa nowadays recognise the need to maintain their autonomy from any political structure and refuse to be regarded as the religious wing of any party or faction.”

These two factors, coupled with growing financial struggles and the withdrawal of local clergy and communities, meant that the SACC had to position itself in cooperation with other ecumenical prophetic voices. One such initiative was the two letters, specifically the second one, written to the African National Congress (ANC) in 2012 and 2013, respectively. Swart (2013, 2) concludes that “this second letter would not only be issued in the name of Kairos Southern Africa; it also carried with it the support and formal endorsement of the leadership of the SACC, the Church Leaders Consultation and The Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA).”

The letters identify with the famous Kairos Document (1988) that postulated an urgent moment in the history of South Africa. The second letter was less affirming of the achievements of the ruling party and made reference to the ruling party, the state, and, more importantly, to the poor and marginalised. The moment of truth could be interpreted as an urgent call to social development within post-apartheid South Africa.

Swart (2013, 4–6) highlights several important elements from the second letter that fell short in the first letter.

- Firstly, the opening of the letter: “The church speaks,” has a dual meaning. It refers to the silence of the church during the reign of the ANC. This has been noticed in the different ecumenical bodies that were established by the different post-apartheid presidents. However, it has now been intensified by both withdrawal of clergy and local churches from the social and political spheres and the deliberate alienation of the church by the ruling party. In addition, it is also a confession that the church neglected its mission and the vocation to be faithful to the abundant life for all people, especially the poor and oppressed. This confession was related to the failure of the church to execute the commitments of the Rustenburg Declaration (Pillay 2017, 5).
- Secondly, the church had to speak a message of hope with God as the ultimate source. Directed towards the current powers and specifically the new elite, the letter is a reminder of God’s dealings with colonialism and racial domination.
- Thirdly, the letter addressed the failure of the current political leadership to govern effectively and honestly to the detriment of the poorest of the poor. According to Pillay (2017, 5), this was a direct call for the implementation of the National Development Plan and “a new kind of politics that will bring abundant life to all with a healthy democracy.”
- Fourthly, the letter addresses the economic leadership’s failure to contribute to the economic development of the poor. Like attempts from the broader ecumenical movement, development was solely from a maximising of profit perspective.
- Fifthly, the letter speaks to the poor and their agency. This could arguably be the most significant contribution that the letter made to social transformation.
- The sixth element, commitment made to social issues, if put together with the fifth, could make a considerable contribution to the development debate.

At face value, these elements and the letter in general address the important issues that the church should speak about. Following a period of isolation and alienation, the SACC has returned to its prophetic role that saw the dismantling of apartheid. The shortcoming of this letter is mainly that it highlights the issues that need to be addressed, but does not translate this into transformation. The issue still remains whether the SACC has contributed towards social justice and, in particular, social development in post-apartheid South Africa. A more damning question is whether the SACC, who enjoyed



the centre space of the ecumenical movement in the period leading up to the dismantling of apartheid, can be regarded as the safe space for the quest of the poor and marginalised.

Within recent years, two initiatives reflect the re-emergence of the SACC as a serious ecumenical body that contributes to the social justice debate and, in particular, the development discourse in South Africa. The first is the Triennial Conference in 2014 under the theme “God of life: Renew, Restore and Transform us for the service of Your Kingdom” (Pillay 2017, 4). The SACC reclaimed its prophetic role and called for the protection of the rights of children, the prevalence of inequalities, and the needs of the poor to strengthen the democracy in the country. This conference was followed by a meeting between the SACC and the leadership of the ANC. At this meeting, a common but neglected issue was presented, namely the struggle for human rights based on democratic rules and human dignity as created in the image of God (SACC 2015, 2).

The meeting between the SACC and ANC in 2015 was followed up with a campaign called “The South Africa we pray for! A Call to Pray and Work for Sustained Hope in Humility and Faith.” This call was aimed at local congregations, individual Christians, and clergy and churches to get involved in the social agenda of the church. It was a plea for active involvement in transformation, healing and reconciliation, prioritising family life, addressing issues of poverty and inequality, challenging economic power relations, and strengthening democracy (Pillay 2017, 4–5).

Despite the challenges and difficulties that the SACC experienced immediately prior to and post-apartheid, its contribution to social justice cannot be ignored. The failure to intensify the role of the church in matters related to social justice can be attributed to structural and organisational limitations. The SACC’s budgetary constraints and its dependency on outside financial and technological support affected the degree to which the church was able to become involved in the reconstruction and development of South Africa. The Corat Report (SACC 2009) clearly shows that the financial support which the government gave to provincial councils influenced the advocacy role of the SACC. Member churches, in particular, questioned the critical role of the church and how the church handled the tension between the government’s national social agenda and the needs of grass-roots communities. This was a contributing factor in the later perceptions of the church by those who are affiliated to the SACC and those members who are in dialogue with the organisation (Pillay 2017, 2).

The withdrawal of the SACC from government and the refusal to be an uncritical partner of the ruling party represented a reversion to the centre space from where the SACC could uncompromisingly reclaim its prophetic role in society. The SACC’s cooperation with other ecumenical initiatives, despite its decline in numbers and structural stature, was a basis for its social agenda. The second letter was a particular prophetic call to return to the *missio Dei* towards the fullness of life for all people. This initiative was the culmination of a distinct turn in the relationship between the ecumenical church and the state. This relationship has been compared to the kind that the church had with the

apartheid government during the 1980s when the Kairos movement emerged (Swart 2013, 4–5).

The pragmatic approach by the SACC was limited and almost non-existent after the withdrawal of funds from international bodies such as the WCC. Programmes were limited and later reduced to consultations and conferences. While the SACC was known for its prophetic role during the apartheid era, this role diminished with the advent of democracy. The “critical solidarity” and later “critical engagement” approach by the SACC towards the state, specifically the ANC, created tensions that would later make it difficult to have a constructive relationship with the ruling party and still be faithful to the call of God for the people of South Africa. Within the development discourse, this tension is situated between the shift from a dependency approach to a people-centred approach. The people-centred approach was the forerunner for the social justice agenda of the ecumenical church.

The tension that emerged between state and church could also be attributed to the theology of reconstruction that first developed under the authorship of Mugambi for development of the African continent. Solomons (2018) asserts that Mugambi “declared the 1990s to be the beginning of Africa’s Renaissance and Reformation and therefore the commencement of a process of reconstruction” (Solomons 2018, 184–195). This theology was also adopted by the AACC under the presidency of Tutu and the then General Secretary Jose Chipenda, and later by Villa-Vicencio for South Africa. A theology of reconstruction was a breakaway from liberation and was intended as a metaphor for the reconstruction of post-apartheid South Africa. With regard to the SACC and theology of reconstruction, Vellem (2013, 177) cites that “To interpret this notion one could simply say that the theology of reconstruction introduced by Villa-Vicencio is one of its core anchors.” It is within this notion of reconstruction that we place the relationship of the SACC and state as “critical solidarity.” This theological paradigm influenced the attempts for development by the state in the initiatives such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme, which became the catalyst of the ANC’s manifesto of 1994.

## **Theology, State and the Church**

There has been a direct link between theology, the SACC, and the state. One can identify signs of different theologies that are linked with the relationship between church and state. Liberation theology, as the overarching theology from the establishment of the SACC in 1968, has been the most identifiable theology of the SACC. With the establishment of a theology of reconstruction in the early nineties, the SACC entered in a relationship with the state with the view of collaborating towards a common humanity on the basis of equality, human dignity, and human rights. Recently, the SACC has been reverting to its original mandate of focusing on the poor and the marginalised. This could be viewed as returning to liberation theology.

While there is an identifiable pattern of theology within state and church relationships, when it comes to the ecumenical movement, this is not so easily identifiable. Conradie (2013, 38) states that “Despite such significant efforts to address a wide-ranging social agenda, Paul Abrecht (2002, 1049–1053) rightly observes that it has been difficult for Christians from different contexts and traditions to agree on a common theological and ethical basis to address societal issues.”

Instead of focusing on specific kinds of theologies, it is rather different theological themes that run through the SACC and its relationship with the state. Since its inception, the dominant theological theme of the SACC has concerned humanity. The first response by the SACC to the racially divisive ideology of apartheid was a five-principle declaration in the *Message*. The five principles can be summarised by the notion “who we are.” The five principles address the theological perspective of human beings created in the image of God. As early as the inception of the SACC, the question of identity was pertinent. The theological notion of what it means to be human included both the substance of humanity and the functionality of being human. In other words, human beings are made in the likeness of God. It also means that human beings are made to be in relationship with the rest of creation. To be human means “being and doing.”

The theme “created in the image of God” also had prominence in the 1970s when the development discourse shifted from modernisation and dependence of the South on the North to the poor and the participation of the poor in development. The shift here is from exclusively economic and technological development to social justice and the role of the poor within development. The AACC and the SACC were influenced by the entrenchment of the relationship between development and the responsibility of the poor.

The two letters referred to above, particularly the second letter, made special reference to the poor and the agency of the poor. This is the clearest indication that within the SACC, the question of “who we are” is two-pronged. It deals with the identity of the poor and South Africans in general, and the capabilities and capacities of those who are marginalised. This notion of humanity is situated within the second letter in conjunction with “abundant life” and the mission of the church.

The late Steve De Gruchy dedicated his life to the tension of being and doing in his approach to development. De Gruchy (2003) asserted that the identity of the poor, and in fact, all humanity, is about being and doing. “It is important to recognise that in both creation accounts from which the affirmation of identity is traditionally drawn, the truth of being made in the image of God (Gen.1:27) or being filled with God’s own breath of life (Gen. 2:7) is immediately coupled with the theme of *vocation*, the calling to be responsible actors in this world newly created by God (Gen 1:28; 2:15)” (Haddad 2015, 70).

The letter is also a confession of the church's "own complicity" and "relative prophetic silence" (SACC 2012, 2). Can this be a confession of lack of commitment to the prophetic mission of the two-pronged variables of what it means to be created in the image of God? While the church has been prophetic in its call to the state for abundant life for the poor, the church did not make this same call to the poor. It was only when the SACC divorced itself from the ANC and returned to its initial space of the centre for the poor and marginalised, that it addressed the poor's lack of involvement in transformation. This is what makes "The South Africa we Pray for: A Call to Pray and Work" different from earlier efforts of the SACC in matters of social justice.

## Conclusion

The role of the ecumenical church is to be a safe space for the poor. It should be a place where the poor take centre stage and speak from a position of power. The ecumenical church must be a place where the stories of the poor by the poor have authenticity.

The church is the centre of the poor and reminds the poor that their humanity is authentic. The ecumenical church is the space where the perceived limitations of the poor are transcended, and the experience of the poor becomes the hermeneutical key for social justice.

The poor initiate development by taking responsibility. Whether it is through agency or participation, the poor elicit transformation that transcends alienation, domination, and assimilation. The church must seek a relationship with the state that will give impetus to initiatives of advocacy, economic policies, laws and societal structures that support the poor as created in the likeness of God.

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