

# AFRICAN FEMINIST REFLECTIONS ON THE ACCRA CONFESSION

*Puleng LenkaBula*

Department of Systematic Theology and Theological Ethics  
University of South Africa

## *Abstract*

This article sets out to discuss, from an African feminist theological perspective, the Accra confession: Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth (hereafter the Accra Confession). It uses descriptive analyses to understand the role and implications of the confession for ecological, gender and economic justice. The first part of the essay briefly describes the history behind the confession. The second part gives a detailed overview of the contents, scope and thematic issues addressed by the confession. The third interprets the confession and analyses its implications for the church and society. The fourth part explores feminist and women's responses and or critiques of the Accra confession, thus outlining its relevance for feminist theologies and ethics, and their conceptions of economic, ecological and gender justice.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This essay employs an African feminist theological ethicist voice to describe, analyse and understand the implications of the 'Accra confession: Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth' (hereafter, the Accra Confession) for economic, ecological and gender justice. The Accra confession was agreed to by the 24<sup>th</sup> General Council of the World Alliance of the Reformed Churches (WARC) in 2004 in Accra, Ghana. It also examines feminists and or women's responses to the confession.

The first part of the article constitutes a brief background to the confession. The aim is to ascertain its underlying principles as well as the processes which undergirded its formulation. It is also to lay the ground for understanding where, when and how it evolved. The second part of the essay presents an overview, interpretation and analyses of the confession. This is to examine its scope as well as the key theological and ethical issues it addresses. The third part of the paper describes feminist and women's analyses of and reflections on the confession. It explores whether the Accra confession is consistent with economic, ecological and gender justice as understood by African feminist theologians or feminist theologians. This is because economic globalisation, economic and ecological justice, have always been core to feminist theologies and ethics discourses.

Feminist responses or women's reactions to the confession will be drawn from the presentations, papers, and insights shared by feminist ethicists, theologians, social scientists and lay women church leaders who met at a WARC follow-up meeting, 'Women and the Accra Confession: Covenanting for life' in August 2005, at St Mary, Jamaica. In addition, the resultant documents, for example, the statement to WARC and WARC affiliated churches produced by the women's follow-up consultation will constitute the primary material for understanding women's and feminist responses to the confession. This will not, however, preclude other sources such as, research and academic papers, books on economic globalisation, justice, feminist ethics methodologies and liturgical resources which relate to the thematic foci of the Accra confession.

## 2 A BRIEF BACKGROUND TO THE ACCRA CONFESSION

The Accra confession is, according to the WARC (2004:1) a culmination of a *processus confessionis*, which is described by WARC as a "process of recognition, education and confession regarding socio-economic injustices and ecological destruction" (WARC 2004 and <http://www.kairoseuropa.de>). It developed after numerous discussions in the WARC community concerning socio-economic injustices in the world. According to 'Towards an economy in the service of life' (<http://www.stichtingoikos.nl>) some of the factors which led to the formulation and proclamation of the Accra confession were the recognition that economic globalisation were negatively affecting peoples, communities and the earth. This recognition had developed after numerous WARC regional consultations had been held in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe. The idea behind conducting these consultations was to analyse the economic questions and to relate them to faith.

The first regional consultation for Asia, according to 'The report of an ecumenical journey: Towards an economy in the service of life' took place in March 1995 in Manila, the Philippines. Participants in this meeting acknowledged the effects of Structural Adjustments Programmes (SAPS) prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). They pointed out that the Asian economy was marked by deregulation and privatisation which had led to "the commodification of life" (<http://www.stichtingoikos.nl>). This, they argued, this resulted in an economy that benefited a small minority whilst, at the same time, including a vast majority of people from participating meaningfully in the economy. The consultation appealed to the churches to resist economic injustices. It also called the churches and individuals to critically examine the link between reformed faith and economic injustices. It stated that, in the context of economic injustices, it was imperative to identify sources of hope which resist and contest economic injustices. Furthermore, they appealed to Christians not to become passive victims in the context of globalisation but to become active in resisting the negative effects of this economy.

The second regional consultation on 'Reformed faith and economic justice'

was held in Kitwe, Zambia in October 1995. At the conclusion of this meeting, the African delegates invited the WARC executive and the member churches to declare economic globalisation and ecological destructions as constituting *status confessionis*.<sup>1</sup> They called the WARC to declare economic injustices and ecological destruction as matters of confession. This was after extensive discussions, reflections and analyses of the plight of Africans and the context of economic globalisation.

The participants at the Kitwe consultation pointed out that economic globalisation impacted negatively on the lives of Africans. They declared that this sad situation, had made them reach a conclusion that “Africans live on a crucified continent as people to be sacrificed ... the sacrifices of humanity at the altar of the global economy is intertwined with the sacrifice of the nature” (<http://www.kairoseuropa.de>). They acknowledged that the global economy had been “sacralized, and elevated to an imperial throne... [It had] changed places with human beings who created it” (Botman 1997:1). Furthermore, they stated that the global capitalist economy had redefined what it meant to be human. It had, according to these participants, acted as though it was the creator of human beings who produced it. By so doing, it had arrogated the sovereignty of God and had claimed freedom that belongs to God. Thus, they agreed that, for them, this situation raised questions of ‘loyalty to God or Mammon’ (refer to <http://www.kairoseuropa.de>). They therefore “concluded that the African experiences of global economic forces can no longer be seen as merely an ethical problem. It has become a theological problem, causing strained loyalties: either God or Mammon” (Botman 1997:1). As a result, they invited WARC executive and member churches to consider this situation as a matter of *status confessionis*. The third of these consultations took place in May 1996, in San Jose, Costa Rica. At this meeting too, the issues of exclusion and economic injustices arose, this time in Latin American discussions on economic globalisation. For instance, issues of the culture of corruption, monopoly control of the land and resources by minorities and militaries, and endless debt were highlighted.

These consultations were followed up by a meeting in Geneva in May 1996. This meeting synthesised and collated key issues observed in these consultations. The 23<sup>rd</sup> WARC General Council followed these consultations, in August 1997 in Debrecen, Hungary. It included among its discussions the issues of economic justice and ecological destruction. It heeded the appeal by African WARC members, as well as the concerns emanating from the consultations referred to above. The general council meeting therefore called for a *processus confessionis* (as described in the above paragraphs) regarding economic injustices and ecological destruction. It stated that such a process required member churches and individual Christians to pay special attention to the analyses and understanding of economic processes; to educate church members at all levels on economic life and to encourage them to develop lifestyles which reject materialism and consumerism; to work toward the formation of a confession of their beliefs about economic life, which would express justice in the whole household of God and act with the victims of injustices (adapted from <http://www.stichtingoikos.nl>).

In March 2001, the WARC held a follow-up meeting in Cape Town, South

Africa. Its purpose was to create space for member churches and the ecumenical church to explore and understand, together, the theological meaning of a *processus confessionis* – that is – covenanting together for justice in the economy and on the earth. It also aimed at clarifying the significance of covenanting and confession together as reformed churches. In addition, it provided the description or definition of confession as understood by the reformed church. Confession was thus understood as an “expression of the firm belief in God who is the giver of life and the true sovereign of life on earth” (<http://www.stichtingoikos.nl>). A confession, it stated, entails among other things,

- repentance before God and victims of oppression;
  - discernment of God’s grace that unmask the merciless and cruel character of the powers that be;
  - resistance to idolatry of money and market;
  - reparation and reconciliation of just relationships;
- With the aim of reconciling in Christ  
<http://www.stichtingoikos.nl>).

Apart from regional conferences which aimed at understanding the economic question, the Accra confession evolved from a tradition - and a history - of a confessing church. For instance, prior to its institution, the reformed church had previously, in 1934 and 1982, called the church to denounce Nazi persecution of the Jewish communities and to declare Apartheid, a heresy. It is also important to note that theologians such as the German theologian, Ulrich Duchrow and others had long been advocating that economic injustices and ecological destruction be declared matters of confession. The practice of confession against injustices is not outside the tradition, heritage, practice and scope of the reformed churches. It is an ongoing process and affirmation to continue confessing faith in the context of grave economic injustices and ecological council. These calls for confession against economic injustices and ecological destruction were heeded and the Accra confession was formulated and agreed to by the 24<sup>th</sup> General Council in August 2004, in Accra, Ghana. In the forthcoming paragraphs, we shall describe, interpret and analyse the contents and scope of the Accra confession.

### 3 OVERVIEW OF THE ACCRA CONFESSION

As stated in the discussion above, the Accra Confession is a confessional response to the challenge of neo-liberal economic globalisation and ecological destruction. It is also the culmination of the *processus confessionis* which officially began with the call for a *processus confessionis* by 23<sup>rd</sup> General council of the WARC in Debrecen, Hungary in 1997. This call was expressed in the following words, “we now call for a committed process of progressive recognition, education and confession (*processus confessionis*) within all WARC member churches at all levels regarding economic injustices and ecological destruction” (WARC 1997). This process was thus approved by the

24<sup>th</sup> WARC general council which met in August 2004 in Accra Ghana. It resulted in the “proclamation of the Accra confession: Covenanting for justice in the economy and the earth”.

The Accra confession covers four comprehensive areas. They include the introduction, reading the signs of the times, covenanting and confession, and proclaiming life in the economy and the earth. The introduction covers points 1 to 4. It paints a picture of how the process and the confession evolved. It states that the 23<sup>rd</sup> general council in Debrecen, Hungary in 1997 invited the member churches of the WARC to enter into a process of “recognition, education and confession (*processus confessionis*)” (WARC 2004:1). It also states that the confession is a decision of faith commitment.

‘Reading the signs of the times’ is covered by points 5 to 14. It entails analysis of neoliberal globalisation and its death-dealing effects on the earth and on peoples. It employs among others things, theological texts such as Romans 8:22 to assert/affirm that the church hears the groans of creation and awaits its liberation and the cries of people who suffer under economic globalisation and ecological destruction. In addition, ‘Reading the signs of the times’ criticises unjust relationships between people and the earth in our world today. It describes the world we live in today as scandalous, to the extent that it denies God’s call for life for all. According to this analyses, this disgraceful situation is revealed in, for example, excessive gaps between the poor and the rich, systemic poverty, the increasing debt of the poor, resource-driven wars, the HIV and Aids global pandemic and the fact that the majority of those who live in poverty are women and children. It claims that this situation is exacerbated by neoliberal policies and ideology which promote policies of unlimited growth to the detriment of poor peoples and the earth. It is also made worse by the extreme drive by transnational corporations to maximise profit and to monopolise control of the economy and the means to life. For instance, it states, “corporations have plundered the earth and severely damaged the environment” (WARC 2004:1).

‘Reading the signs of times’ also links ecological and economic injustices to neoliberalism. It states that the ideology of economic globalisation claims to be without alternatives. It demands endless sacrifices from the poor and from creation. The enormity and complexity of the problem has therefore resulted in a situation where the church can no longer pretend or act as if there are simple answers or solutions to the problems posed by economic and ecological injustices. This conscious awareness of the complexity of the problem enables the confession to humbly state the following:

[A]s seekers of truth and justice and looking through the eyes of the powerless and suffering people, we see that the current world (dis)order is rooted in an extremely complex and immoral economic system defended by the empire. In using the term ‘empire’ we mean the coming together of economic and cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests (WARC 2004:2).

A further link between neoliberal economics and contemporary geopolitics is made in 'Reading the signs of the times'. The connection between neoliberal economics and geopolitics, it is argued, works in favour of the powerful and the wealthy by protecting the interests of the powerful and of property owners. It states that, in biblical terms, a system of politics and economics which promotes wealth based on accumulation at the expense of the poor is considered to be unfaithful to God. It is seen as being responsible for preventable human suffering. Moreover, the confession states that, in theological and biblical terms, it is called 'Mammon'. This is because it contradicts Jesus's assertion that people "cannot serve both God and Mammon (Luke 16:13)" (WARC 2004:2).

The third thematic focus is titled 'Confession of faith in the face of economic injustice and ecological destruction'. It includes points 15 to 36. It clarifies the use and the meaning of confession in relation to economic injustice and ecological destruction as used in the Accra confession. For instance, it states:

A faith commitment may be expressed in various ways according to regional and theological traditions: as confession, as confessing together, as faith stance, as being faithful to the covenant of God. We choose confession not meaning a classical doctrinal confession, because the World Alliance of Reformed Churches cannot make such a confession, but to show the necessity and urgency on an active response to the challenges of our time and the call of Debrecen. We invite member churches to receive and respond to our common witness (WARC 2004:2).

In 'Confession of faith in the face of economic injustice and ecological destruction' the confession insists that ecological destruction and global ecological justice are essential to the integrity of faith in God and discipleship of Christians. It states that the Christian faith is at stake if Christians remain silent and refuse to act in the face of the current system of neoliberal globalisation. It reiterates that "we confess before God and one another" (WARC 2004:2). This assertion is underscored by the belief in God who is the creator and sustainer and who calls peoples as partners in creation and redemption. It is also grounded on the belief in the fullness of life and the view that God calls peoples to stand with those who are victims of injustices. This implies that the church is called to act on the cries of the poor, victims of economic globalisation and the groaning creation.

The confession identifies a number of issues which the reformed faith rejects. These are:

- any claims which subvert God's sovereignty;
- any economic order which puts profits before people and does not care for creation;
- and, any church practice or teaching which excludes the poor and care for creation in its mission.

It also announces that the church is called to challenge any economic or

political system which gives comfort to those “who come to steal, kill and destroy” (John 10:10) rather than follow the good shepherd who has come for the fullness of life for all. The confession, in point 34, re-asserts that the church has to be humble as it stands before God’s judgement. The confession suggests that this is because the church has sometimes been complicit in the neoliberal economic global system. At times, it has consciously or unconsciously benefited from this system. An additional point states that some members of the church have also become captives to the culture of consumerism, competitive greed and selfishness entailed in economic globalisation and its ideology.

The fourth area is ‘covenanting for justice.’ In this, the confession acknowledges that confessing faith together is an act of obedience to God’s will. It claims that this constitutes an act of faithfulness in shared solidarity and responsible relationships which bind Christians together to work for justice in congregational, local and international contexts. Mutual solidarity and accountability, suggests the confession, ought to encourage Christians to work together with other unions, such as the ecumenical community, communities of other faiths, civil, people’s and social movements for a just economy and the integrity of creation. This, it suggests, will be an affirmation of the church’s commitment to seeking alternatives to economic and ecological injustices. This affirmation is expressed in the following words: “the church proclaim[s] with passion that we will commit ourselves, our time and our energy to changing, renewing, and restoring the economy and the earth, choosing life, so that we and our descendants might live” (Deuteronomy10:19) (WARC 2004:4).

## 4 ANALYSIS OF THE CONFESSION

Setri Nyomi (2005:4) suggests that the Accra confession is committed to exposing “the distortions inherent in the unjust world in which we live”. It is an expression of faith together to “expose those who consign fellow human beings to prisons of poverty and injustice” (Nyomi 2005:4). According to Yong-Bock (2001:10), there are a number of elements which characterise a confession. These are:

- repentance before God and a public manifest of guilt which is expressed at both an individual and a collective level;
- a radical self-examination as well as an examination of the powers that be;
- denunciation and rejection of idolatrous powers that claim to be ultimate;
- proclamation of a firm belief in God, who is sovereign over life on earth, and who promises the new garden of life in the new heaven and the new earth.

In Yong-Bock’s words (2001:14) confessing individually and together “is taking a stance on a definite alternative, even if it [the alternative] may not be perfect

and ultimate". A similar point is expressed by Duchrow (2001:14). He suggests that a confession develops into a response and faith stance against an economy which produces death for peoples and the earth. It evolves as a response to a situation which makes suffering normative, life hopeless and which ignores ecological destruction. It also develops because the distortions and totalitarian, life-destroying character of the neoliberal economic globalisation and ecological destruction can no longer be ignored. It thus constrains the church to "confess the life-giving and life-sustaining loving God, Father and Mother and Jesus Christ, who lives the good news to the poor and confronts the powers of death giving his own life for the peoples of God and the holy spirit empowering us to resist, endure and struggle for alternative" (Duchrow 2001:14).

The Accra confession articulates its biblical referents eloquently. For instance, it utilises biblical texts such as Luke 16:13, Matthew 6:24 which warn Christians against serving idols. These, for instance, assert that "no one can serve two masters ... you cannot serve God and Wealth". The confession also refers to Biblical texts such as Exodus 20 which cautions and encourages Christians not to make idols for themselves to worship. For instance, the first commandment states that "you shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them". According to the Asian theologian Yong-Bock (2001:4) these biblical referents are important because they assert that "the principalities and powers in political and economic forms are not to be 'worshiped' in place of God". Furthermore they also emphasise that "faith in God is incompatible with the power of Mammon" (Yong-Bock 2001:4).

Apart from exposing the distortions of the current economic injustices and ecological destruction, the Accra confession aims at exposing the death-dealing effects of neoliberal economic globalisation in the hopes of unearthing, constructing and seeking alternatives. As stated in the report of the forum of the south-north churches in Buenos Aires, Argentina in April 2003, there is an increasing recognition that neoliberal economic globalisation results in the suffering and death of people and creation on a massive scale. This results in situations where, as has been noted, life is at stake, suffering, poverty and diseases like HIV and Aids, social insecurity, hunger and starvation and ecological destruction are used as opportunities for the maximisation of profit. These effects are evident in the manner in which it functions particularly through economic exclusion, economic speculation, political erosion, military protectionism, cultural control and domination, which are all based on power and profit. Economic exclusion threatens God's gift of the fullness of life in Jesus Christ as affirmed in (John 10:10). Life is also threatened by the combination of poverty and unemployment in which at least 1.3 billion people are excluded from "active participation in the economic, political, social and cultural life of their communities and countries. The phenomenon of exclusion has contributed to the disintegration of societies" (WARC 2005:2b).

Neoliberal globalisation is also based on economic speculation which is contrary to the biblical claim that God has graciously bestowed on the earth



and its people enough resources that all may have life. Economic speculation moves money to markets where it has the potential to grow faster and maximise profit. It neglects the humanitarian and economic mandates of those engaged in businesses. It operates in a manner similar to that of Casinos where money is not invested in productive work, humanity and or the earth. It also leads to political erosion, military protectionism and cultural control. To ensure that money carries on moving, free from political intervention “politics and economics are dominated by rich countries of the north. They use undemocratic international institutions like the G8 Summits, the international Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to weaken the political control of the nation-states over national economies” (WARC 2005b). In many instances, democratic principles are compromised and mechanisms which fast-track profit maximisation, exploitation of the poor and women are promoted through mechanisms such as deregulation (no regulation or political intervention), market liberalisation, tax reductions for corporate sectors and reduction or privatisation of essential services such as health, education, water and housing.

The confession recognises and critiques structural abuses which are endorsed by states, governments and multilateral institutions which continue to push for more intensive neoliberal globalisation in the midst of massive suffering by women, the poor and those marginalised by the economy. To illustrate this, the confession underlines in its analysis that the military in many instances, is used to oppress and obstruct voices that call for human rights, democratic principles and basic needs and rights. More often than not, the military receives a new mandate “which is to protect the interests of the moneyed classes instead of its initial calling to preserve justice and peace for the people” (WARC 2005:3b).

Another important point advanced by the Accra confession, is the observation that, to a large extent, the media are employed in ways that promote cultural control. It claims that this is often achieved by promoting consumption, accumulation and destruction as normative cultures. Furthermore, the media subsumes or underplays people’s identities and emphasises their consumption as if this fully defines them. In addition, the domination of people, in order to ensure profit and control, is endorsed in numerous ways. This is done by promoting, among other things, the engineering of food and genes for profit and not for the needs of the poor, sick and or marginalised. These mechanisms are often employed to further consolidate “the exercise of domination and control over humanity and the earth” (WARC 2005b:3).

It is clear from the above analyses that the consideration of the economy and ecological injustices as questions of confession is grounded on the pursuit of justice against the perversion of power and ecological destruction. It is also based on the observation that ecological destruction is no longer merely a policy issue. It is an issue of ‘life-and-death’ (Duchrow 2001:7).

Yong-Bock (2001:6-7) points out that the confession recognises that ecological destruction is a question of systemic power which stems from the inherent arrogance of human power over life on earth. According to Yong-Bock (2001:6-7) anthropocentric arrogance over the earth is consistently

coupled with greed in the name of survival and prosperity. This he argues is undergirded by the motive of conquering nature which has been “an historic imperial ambition of the empires”. Furthermore, ecological destruction through conquest of nature, argues Yong-Bock (2001:6-7) “is not merely an ecological question. It is a question of the political domination of the universe”.

Apart from bringing the issues of the economy and ecology into the theological and confessional life of the church, the Accra confession according to Seong-Won Park (2005:2) critically displays four significant features. First, it “took seriously the question of life as a confessional subject” (Park 2005: 2). It has become common in the life of the church to take dogmatic or ecclesiological issues as the main themes for a confession. However, in the case of the Accra Confession “justice for life was taken as a confessional subject” (Park 2005:2). Secondly, it demonstrated a balance between solidarity, justice and unity of the church “even though there was no complete consensus in the analysis of the situation” (Park 2005:2). The third important element is that it advanced a process of building an ecumenical and mutual commitment to justice initiated by the World Council of Churches (WCC) commission on justice peace and the integrity of creation, even though the confession was made by the reformed family only. The fourth and final point he regards as important, is that

The voices of the churches of the South were clear and brave. There have long been cries for justice in the economy and in the international communities in venues like the UN but these voices have not always been given enough attention. The voices of the South were heard with respect at the Accra general council (Park 2005:3).

It can be summarised that the Accra confession affirmed its rejection of economic exclusion, injustice and ecological destruction.

## 5 FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL RESPONSES TO THE ACCRA CONFESSIO

Our purpose in this part of the article is to explore feminist theological and Christian ethical responses to the Accra confession. As stated earlier, feminist and women’s responses to the confession will primarily, but not solely, depend on the papers which were officially presented at a meeting held in St Mary Jamaica in August 2005. Other feminist theological and ethical resources which are useful to ecological and economic justice will be utilised.

The consultation on ‘Women and the Accra confession’ workshop brought together more than 26 women from across the world. Its principal aim was to create spaces for reformed women theologians, ethicists, lay and ordained church leaders to critically offer their reflections to the Accra confession thus engaging member churches and partners of WARC “to design a way forward for the Accra Confession, particularly with regard to gender and women’s involvement” (WARC 2005a:4). It also aimed at

[A]ugmenting the scope of advocacy for justice and peace in the church and in society; promoting dialogue, solidarity and partnership in strengthening the promotion of socio-economic, ecological and gender justice in the church and in society and creating space for women from the south and north, to engage in postcolonial and or feminist analyses and critique of the interpretation of the Accra confession (WARC 2005:2).

The objectives of the workshop were:

- to respond to the Accra confession with a critical gender perspective and make visible issues which are crucial to women;
- to include women's leadership in the reception of the Accra confession and action for justice and right relationships;
- to discuss possibilities for developing a pedagogical structure which is inclusive and which reflects women's principles, values and ways of striving to build community;
- to find new ways of developing key partners/ networks and building solidarity in our witness for justice in the economy and the earth (WARC 2005a:4).

The meeting employed feminist and women's theological and ethical methodologies as effective ways understanding, analysing, critiquing and carrying forward the process of covenanting for justice. Feminist methodologies are understood as the tools for "construction and reconstruction which provide framework of understanding and internal coherence for the credibility of theology" (Chopp 1996:181). They shape the approaches and principles that feminist theologians and ethicists use in crafting their theologies. Chopp (1996:181) suggests at least five characteristics which shape feminist theological methodologies. Although these do not fully exhaust the breadth of feminist theological methodologies, they provide a good framework for discussion. These include, first, the use of pragmatic critical theory which is "historically and socially contextual ... and which [uses] the symbols, images, and concepts involved in the situation and attempts to move against distortion and dysfunction to shape new forms of flourishing" (Chopp 1996:181). This, according to Andolsen (2000: 5), also entails utilising "a plurality of feminist theological images and linguistic terms in public religious discourse - confident that these images and words have, or will come to have, 'an authentic public character'". The second element is the identification of the norm or norms for theological or ethical reflection. For feminist theologians and ethicists, suggests Chopp (1996:181) this is 'emancipatory transformation', which refers to "the saving of all the earth from various forms of sin and destruction and for human and planetary flourishing" (Chopp 1996:181). The third element is the use of gender analysis to demonstrate the oppositional construction of 'man' and 'woman' and to expose how gender injustices also distort ecological, personal and social relations. The fourth entails the search for alternatives or new possibilities of articulating and speaking about and reflecting on God, human life and the earth, which therefore claims the reconstructive aspect of Christian theology in

the anticipation of the 'new heaven' and the 'new earth'. The fifth element is also a combination of epistemology and ethics, and insistence that 'good' and 'true' must be directly or indirectly connected in order to challenge Christian theologies, ethics or spiritualities which seek to undermine or de-link theological reflection from contextual realities, lives and praxis. These five base points and others, to a large extent, shape feminist reflections on and interpretation of the *Accra confession*.

One of the central purposes of the Accra confession is to "evoke a yearning for a common life marked by forms of justice that are 'ineffably more than' what we know now. The 'more' for which we yearn in our common life includes especially more just forms of relationship between women and men" (Andolson 2000:17). This is because, throughout history, women have themselves felt called to proclaim God's will despite socio-economic and cultural obstacles which have often disabled them for doing so. The confession presents an opportunity to strengthen liberation pedagogy, social justice and equality. "Interpreting and engaging the confession offers an opportunity to encourage dialogue, critical thinking and committed action by Christians with regard to issues of economic, ecological and gender justice" (Bula quoted in WARC 2005).

The statement released by women at the workshop in Jamaica affirmed the church for identifying economic and ecological injustices as central to the ministry of the church and its confession. It stated that economic and ecological justices are detrimental to women. Their negative impacts are also exacerbated by the unjust social relations, which are, to a large extent, underscored by patriarchal kyriarchy. Through this statement, the women gave the assurance that they had taken time to listen and reflect on the cries of injustice from particular locations, which express many women's experiences. These locations included the conditions of poverty, racial injustice, HIV and Aids in women and youth, trafficking of women and children and the effects of neoliberal globalisation on women and youth in urban settings. They asserted that there was "an inseparable link between ecology, economic justice and gender equality" (WARC 2005:1).

Furthermore, the women pointed out that the inextricable link between economic, ecological and gender injustices must be emphasised. This is partly because, although the confession adequately analyses the effects of economic injustices and ecological destruction, it does not necessarily or categorically name the victims of these problems. It gives an impression that ecological and economic injustices affect different peoples in similar ways. It presents a picture which seems to suggest that all people are touched by these problems in comparable ways.

The women participants at this meeting emphasised that ecological, economic and gender injustices clearly demonstrate the deathly face of economic globalisation. They observed that those deathly faces of economic, ecological and gender injustices manifest themselves "when elements of life such as water are privatised and thus become inaccessible for many. Women carry the main weight of the commodification of God's creation ... the feminisation of poverty can also be seen in the fact that 60-70 percent of the world's poor are

women". (WARC 2005:1wn statement).

In particular, women participants in this meeting charged that the confession had not categorically identified or named the victims of economic injustices and ecological destruction. They pointed out that, in many cases, it is women and children who are at the receiving end of ecological destruction and the injustices of neoliberal economic globalisation. They also stated that the unjust trade rules and economic policies that are promoted by mechanistic and misogynist governance of policy-making institutions and the policies created by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation have to be reviewed and changed, as they aggravate the economic situation of women, poor communities and the environment.

The women delegates affirmed that, by placing economic injustice and ecological destruction at the centre of theological reflections and faith practices, the confession ministered to the people in ways that were comparable to the message proclaimed by Jesus (Luke 4:18) which affirms the care for the poor and marginalised to the reign of God. By so doing, the confession had validated the "struggle[s] against the chains of oppression, the yokes of injustices, and the captivity of people who are oppressed as central to the ministry of the church" (WARC 2005:2).

The women critiqued the broad and generalised language of inclusivity of the confession. They pointed out that this ultimately renders women's voices, experiences and theologies invisible in the teachings and praxis of the church. They also stated that the analyses of power imbalances in the church and society, pertaining to gender relations and the patriarchal and racist structures that justify, support and worsen the depths of the crises for women, are absent from the Accra confession.

Women participants in Jamaica declared that the absence of some of the most critical death-dealing issues which are crucial to women, such as migration, trafficking and sale of women and children, unemployment and underemployment, racism and gender injustices, were most telling about the gender injustice limitations of the church. This critique was most clear in Peralta's paper 'Economic globalisation and trafficking in women'. Peralta (2005:1) identified one of the challenging effects of economic globalisation as the trafficking of women [I would include and children]. She pointed out that "every year, up to four million people are trafficked and traded for forced and exploitative labour, including the provision of sexual services. A huge and growing majority of trafficked persons are women" (UN FPA 2000 quoted Peralta 2005).

Peralta states that most analyses by churches and agencies working on issues of trafficking fail to make full systemic connections between trafficking in women and economic globalisation. They tend to see it as an issue of migration or human or legal rights, whilst neglecting political economy contexts in which the practice thrives. She argues that "while studies often cite poverty as a 'main aggravating factor' or root cause for trafficking, the links between poverty, policies promoting economic globalisation and trafficking are rarely fully examined. And if links are made at all, the findings are often

inadequately captured in the various proposals to address the problems” (Peralta 2005:10).

Theological reflections on ecological and economic justice by African women have also been entailed in the work of the Tanzanian theologian Alice Kabugumila. In her article ‘Tanzanian Women’s Responses to the Environmental Crises’, Kabugumila observes that women have tended to be the major victims of environmental crises in Tanzania. She says the environmental crises not only affect gender relations between men and women, but they also affect the nutritional and health status of whole communities in Tanzania. Accordingly, she suggests that some alternatives ought to be pursued. These would include among others, church involvement in water conservation, tree planting and conservation, energy-saving utilities as well as a radical life change in consumerist lifestyles.

A reaffirmation of the imperative to analyse the gender, economic and ecological justice issues as they affect Africa and African communities is also affirmed by Kanyoro in ‘Engendered communal theology: African women’s contribution to theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’, Kanyoro (2001:162). She says theological engagement with gender issues seeks to expose the harm and injustices that are in society and these are extended to Scripture and the teachings and practices of the church through culture. Furthermore she states that gender analyses are used in theological discourse by African women to seek to “understand how our societies are organised and how power is used by different groups of people, by men and women, by young and old, and by people of varying economic means” (Kanyoro 2001:162). The result is not only to find out who benefits from economic and ecological structures or injustices but also to clarify for ourselves the ways in which roles, attitudes, values and relationships regarding women and men are constructed in our societies, as well as seeking God’s justice to reconstruct those that limit life and destroy the environment.

It would seem to me that feminist and women’s analyses and reflections on economic, ecological and gender justice do not just deem it enough to analyse and critique the Accra confession only in the spirit of feminist theologies and ethics. They have also found it imperative to ensure that the issues they addressed could find meaning and expression in concrete situations in local and international contexts of the church. For instance, the women at the Jamaica Consultations referred to in the above, pledged to embark on the following practical measures:

- Ensure that the Accra confession is more widely distributed and is communicated in accessible manner through the employment of popular and academic education approaches.
- Develop feminist/womanist/mujerista theologies which honour the link between ecology, economy and gender.
- Develop liturgical materials that reflect a critical feminist and/or gender perspectives and aim to work in partnership with other church groups and social movements on ecological

and economic justice issues and to disseminate them to theological faculties, churches, seminaries, women's organisations in the church and in society, university bodies and social movements.

- Ensure that processes of interpretation, implementation and reflections on the Accra confession and engagement with member churches and the ecumenical movement include the participation and voices of women, youth and men, both laity and ordained at all levels (refer to the statement by women at a meeting in Jamaica).

These are to be undergirded by the following theological affirmations:

- Theologies and pneumatology which is ethically accountable and addresses the ways Christians understand God's work in creation; Jesus's concern for the poor, women and other marginalised people; and the ongoing work of the holy spirit in calling all peoples to the struggle for justice for all, especially those oppressed and marginalised on the basis of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and different abilities (WARC 2005:3).
- Jesus's reinterpretation of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:18f and the prophets' (major and minor) combination of justice with ethics and "Micah's insistence that ethical responsibility is a necessary faith stance" (WARC 2005:4).

They emphasised their commitment to the search for alternatives to life-denying economic, ecological and gender relations in the contemporary world.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This paper embarked on a descriptive presentation and analyses of the Accra confession through an African feminist ethics lens, grounded on the belief that justice in gender, economic and ecological relations is important to the ministry of the church.

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## ENDNOTE

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1 *Status Confessionis* has been understood by the Reformed churches as any declaration which stems from the conviction that the integrity of the Gospel is in danger. It is a call from error to truth. It demands of the church a clear, unequivocal decision for the truth of the Gospel, and identifies the opposed opinion, teaching practice as heretical. The declaration of a status confessionis refers to the practice of the church as well as to its teachings (definition taken from Perret, E (ed) Seoul 1989: Proceedings of the 22<sup>nd</sup> General Council 1990:173-175).