Scriptura 94 (2007), pp. 1-9

THE WHOLE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD (OIKOS): SOME ECCLESIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES PART 1

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Abstract

In ecumenical discourse the "whole household of God" has emerged as a new theological root metaphor. This metaphor integrates especially three ecumenical themes (based on the Greek root "oikos"), namely the quests for economic justice, ecological sustainability and ecumenical fellowship. The metaphor may be used to refer to the family's household, the fellowship of churches, but also to a "wider ecumenicity" (the unity of humankind) and to the earth as God's house within which we live. This begs the question as to how the metaphor may be employed in an ecclesiological *context. If the church is not itself the household of God, what is its place and mission within this household? Part I of this article addresses this question in critical dialogue with recent ecumenical discourse on "Ecclesiology and Ethics". Part 2 of this article takes this dialogue further. The bibliography is included in Part 2.*

Keywords: Ecclesiology, Ecumenical, Ethics, Household, Oikos

Introduction: Ecumenical Discourse on the Household of God

In recent ecumenical discourse[1] the notion of the "whole household of God" (*oikos*) has been employed as a theological root metaphor and a new doctrinal key.[2] The power of this metaphor lies in its ability to integrate especially three core ecumenical themes on the basis of derivatives of the Greek root *oikeo* (to dwell) – which forms the etymological root of the quests for economic justice (the *nomoi* or regulations within the household), ecological

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1 See, especially, Cobb 1992:55f, Conradie 2005, George 1990, Hessel & Nash 1996:6f, Meeks 1989, Mudge 1999, Müller-Fahrenholz 1995, Rasmussen 1994, 1995, 1996 & Raiser 1991:79-111, 1997:49-51. See also the doctoral thesis by Warmback (2006) who explores resources for the construction of an "oikotheology", drawing especially from the earthkeeping initiatives in the Anglican diocese of Umzimvubu in South Africa.

2 I have explored the notion of "doctrinal keys" elsewhere at length (see Conradie 2001). Doctrinal keys are theological constructs which are used to establish a relationship between the Biblical texts and contemporary contexts. They have a double function in this regard. They provide a key to unlock the meaning of *both* the contemporary context *and* the Biblical texts and simultaneously enable the interpreter to establish a *link* between text and contemporary context. Doctrinal keys are not only employed to *find* similarities but to *construct* similarities, to *make* things similar (*idem-facere*). The scope of such interpretative keys is often quite comprehensive: They purport to provide a clue to the core meaning of the contemporary context *as a whole* and the Biblical text *as a whole*. They therefore also offer a uni*fy*ing vision, that is, a construction of unity (*unum-facere*). Such unification is probably hermeneutically inevitable even though a hermeneutics of suspicion on the dangers of enforcing a hegemony is called for. While metaphors and even root metaphors may be alternated quite easily, this does not apply to doctrinal keys. Soteriological concepts such as "Christ's victory", "justification", "liberation" or "the imitation of Christ" have offered a certain stability to entire theological traditions.

sustainability (the *logos* or underlying principles of the household) and ecumenical fellowship (*oikoumene* – participating as members of the whole household of God).

Such ecumenical discourse on the whole household of God is best understood within the context of the whole work of God (creation, providence, redemption, completion) which has traditionally been described as the "economy of the triune God" (*oikonomia tou theou*), from which the term "economic trinity" has also been derived. Christian communities live from the conviction that the whole household (*oikos*) belongs to God and has to answer to God's economy.[3]

On this basis, the notion of the whole household of God may serve as a theological root metaphor for current discourse on a wide variety of theological themes. It has been employed for an ecological doctrine of creation based on the indwelling of God's Spirit in creation[4] and in the ecclesial community,[5] an anthropology of stewardship (the *oikonomos*)[6] or one of being "at-home-on earth",[7] a soteriology and an ecclesiology focusing on the way of becoming members of the "household of God" (Eph 2:19-22),[8] an eschatology expressing the hope that the house which we as humans inhabit (the earth) will indeed become God's home,[9] a pastoral theology toward the edification of the household (*oikodomé*),[10] and an ethics of eco-justice,[11] inhabitation,[12] homemaking, hospitality[13] and sufficient

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3 See Meeks 1989:33f.

4 Behind much of the current ecumenical discourse on the *oikos* metaphor lurks the ecological doctrine of creation of Jürgen Moltmann. In his seminal work *God in creation* (1985) Moltmann emphasises the indwelling of God in creation through the Spirit (1985:98-103). He notes that "Human beings already experience the indwellings of God in the Spirit here in history, even if as yet only partially and provisionally" (1985:5). Christian hope for the consummation of creation is a hope that creation will become the home and dwelling place of God's glory: "If the creative God himself dwells in his creation, then he is making it his own home, 'on earth as it is in heaven'. All created beings then find in nearness to him the inexhaustible wellspring of their life, and for their part find home and rest in God. (1985:5).

5 For one example, see Van Ruler's (1969) essay on the structural differences between Christology and pneumatology: Christ is Immanuel (God *with* us) while the inhabitation of the Spirit suggests that God is also *in* us.

6 Larry Rasmussen (1994:118) observes that "if English had adopted the Greek word for steward (*oikonomos*), we would immediately recognise the steward as the trustee, the caretaker of creation imaged as *oikos*."

7 There are numerous contributions toward a theological anthropology which focus on the need for humans to recognise that they are "at home on earth" (for an overview, see Conradie 2005:6-7, 26-40). For a critical engagement with such discourse, while staying with the root metaphor of the household of God, see my *An ecological Christian anthropology: At home on earth?* (Conradie 2005).

8 For brief comments on the soteriological and ecclesiological dimensions of the metaphor of God's household, see Meeks 1989:33-36. Meeks speaks of God as "the Economist" to describe the way in which God is redeeming the world (through the *nomoi* of *Torah* and gospel) and its implications for the economy.

9 See especially Moltmann 1985, 1996 and my *Hope for the earth* (Conradie 2000 / 2005) which employs the distinction between "house" and "home", suggesting that the earth is the house which we as humans inhabit, but that it is not our home yet. Christian hope may be interpreted as the hope to be at home with God, on earth as it is in heaven.

10 See Müller-Fahrenholz (1995) and the discussion in section 2 below.

11 The term "ecojustice" is often used in ecumenical discourse to capture the need for a comprehensive sense of justice that can respond to both economic injustice and ecological degradation. It is for example employed in the important study document on *Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth* produced by the Justice, Peace and Creation team of the World Council of Churches (2005) – in which the household of God also operates as the theological root metaphor. The term "ecojustice" was coined by William Gibson (see, Gibson 1985, 1989, 1996) and popularised by Dieter Hessel (see, Hessel 1985. 1992, 1996). Hessel (1996:19, 22f) identifies the following basic norms for an ecojustice ethics: Solidarity with other creatures, ecological sustainability, sufficiency and socially just participation.

12 See the contributions on a theology of the built environment by Bergmann (2005) and Gorringe (2002, 2005).

13 See Raiser 1991:109-111.

nourishment.[14] Although one may also develop a Christology on the basis of the notion of the household of God (Christ being the cornerstone of this house according to Ephesians 2:20), there is a tendency in ecumenical discourse on the *oikos* metaphor to move away from a Christological focus towards a pneumatological orientation.[15]

In ecumenical discourse on "Life and Work" and on "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation", the household of God serves as a theological root metaphor to reflect on a number of aspects: The integrity of the biophysical foundations of this house (the earth's biosphere), the economic management of the household's affairs, the need for peace and reconciliation amidst ethnic, religious and domestic violence within this single household, a concern for issues of health and education; the place of women and children within this household and an ecumenical sense of the unity not only of the church, but also of the whole of humankind and of all of God's creation, the whole inhabited world (*oikoumene*).[16] Given this strong ethical emphasis, it is not always entirely clear from ecumenical discourse what difference it makes to describe the planetary household as the household *of God,* that is, in terms of God's inhabitation. There is indeed a danger of talking about the household of God without talking about (or to) God

It should be clear that the household of God as a theological root metaphor has considerable strengths. It will appeal to families who treasure a sense of homeliness and those (often women) for whom homemaking constitutes a major part of their daily lives.[17] Perhaps it will also appeal to those, for example in Africa, who have been denied a home: (environmental) refugees, the homeless waiting upon some housing scheme, those who were forcibly removed from their ancestral homes (also under apartheid in South Africa), street children, battered women and (potential) rape victims for whom "home" is indeed a dangerous place and all those who have not found a place where they can feel at home. It may also be applicable to countless species whose habitat has been invaded for the sake of human interests. Clearly, although the earth does not provide a home for all yet, the yearning of Christian hope is that all God's creatures will find a lasting home in God's household.

Like all metaphors, the notion of the "household of God" has certain limitations.[18] Since any notion of the household is necessarily a form of social construction, it can easily be employed to serve the interests of patriarchs (the proverbial *paterfamilias*), possessive parents, the propagation of preconceived "family values", the restriction of slaves, women and children to the private sphere, or the domestication (!) of emancipatory struggles.[19] Moreover, many a dictator has tried to portray himself as a "family man". In pluralist industrial societies the influence of the household is often restricted to the sphere of the private or to

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[14] See the eloquent description of what "home" entails by Meeks (1989:36): "Home is where everyone knows your name. Home is where you can always count on being confronted, forgiven, loved, and cared for. Home is where there is always a place for you at the table. And, finally, home is where you can count on sharing what is on the table."

[15] This is especially evident in the influential work of Konrad Raiser (see 1991, 1997). In his *Ecumenism and transition* (1991) Raiser explores the need for a paradigm shift in ecumenical theology from a "narrow" Christological focus towards a "broader" pneumatological orientation which would supplement (but not replace) the earlier paradigm. As I have argued elsewhere; this calls for renewed theological reflection on the *filioque* controversy (see Conradie 2002 and the concluding section below).

[16] Raiser 1997:49.

[17] See Oduyoye 2001:78.

[18] See also the observation by Michael Welker (1999:41) that the image of earth as a house does not take the self-productive activity of the earth into account satisfactorily. If anything, the earth is portrayed in the creation narratives in Genesis not as a house but rather as an active empowering agent which brings forth life.

[19] The crucial question is therefore how *oikos* and *polis* (political power and rule) are related to one another and how both of these are related to *kosmos*. See Meeks 1989:8.

recreation after hours. The use of the *oikos* metaphor may therefore unwittingly reinforce the marginalisation and privatisation of Christian witness in society.

Alternatively, the inclusiveness of the notion of a household may be expanded to such an extent that it has no boundaries – unlike any particular household. If a household can offer no sense of belonging inside and can exclude nothing on the outside, then it would become virtually meaningless and would no longer offer any sense of being at home. The household with its fenced vegetable and fruit garden epitomises the human need for *surrounded* social and moral space. Indeed housing typically precedes life.[20] Or, as Konrad Raiser suggests, the ecumenical household "constantly displays this duality between boundary and openness, independence and relationship, rest and movement, the familiar and the alien, continuity and discontinuity."[21]

The argument of this contribution is that reflection on the boundaries of the household raises important ecclesiological questions since it is no longer clear what the notion of the household refers to. In ecumenical theology the fellowship of churches (*oikoumene*) is typically portrayed in terms of the image of a household. However, there are also calls for a "wider ecumenicity" which would incorporate all human beings (the living and the dead), based on the unity of humankind and not only the unity of the church[22] and inviting dialogue with people of other living faiths. This usage seeks to recover the original scope of the "whole inhabited and habitable world" in the Greek *oikoumene*.[23] In economic ethics, the site of the household is understood as the economy, the site of human livelihood.[24] In ecological theology it is the earth itself (the biosphere) which is typically portrayed as the household of God. It is argued that the household of God cannot be conceived in crudely anthropocentric terms as a communion of human beings. The household includes more than family members, friends, neighbours, visitors, foreigners and – in African terms – the communion between the living and the dead. It also includes domestic animals, livestock, food supplies, clothing, furniture, appliances, energy supplies, water supplies, gardens, trees, flowers, soil, and all the building materials of the house itself. Accordingly, the earth itself is ultimately the larger house which human beings inhabit together with multiple other forms of life.

If the metaphor of the household receives such more inclusive (if not universal) connotations, this begs the question *how it may be employed in an ecclesiological context to redescribe the nature and mission of the church in society*.[25] If the church is not itself the household of God, what is its place and mission within this household?[26] What is the scope of the household which is to be built up (*oikodomé*)? How should membership of the household of God be understood? Does the metaphor of the household, precisely as the

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20 Moltmann 2003:113-4., also 1985:144.

21 Raiser 1991:88.

22 See the study by the Faith and Order commission of the World Council of Churches on "Unity of the Church - Unity of humankind" (No. 88) in Gassmann (1993:137-143). The Uppsala assembly of the WCC already announced that "The Church is bold in speaking of itself as the sign of the coming unity of mankind." In discourse on the unity of mankind three ecumenical themes are related to one another: 1) the unity of the church, 2) the church as a sign of unity to the world, and 3) the universality of God's reign over all people.

23 See Raiser (1991:84) who identifies a major tension within the ecumenical movement on this basis.

24 See Meeks 1989:3.

25 I am using the word "church" here in a generalised way primarily as a theological category and not as a sociological category describing different levels of the church (as worshipping communities, congregations, denominations, ecumenical fellowships, Christian organisations or individual Christians at work in society).

26 Meeks (1989:23) provides one answer: "The Holy Spirit seeks to transform a portion of the world into the church so that, as transformed world, the church may live for the future of the world." He does not develop this into a coherent exposition of the metaphor's ecclesiological significance.

household *of God,* help to clarify the orientation of the church not only on its own edification, but also on the needs of society? To widen the scope of the *oikos* metaphor (seeing the smaller households within the larger household) may help to establish the inextricable relatedness of church, economy and earth and thus to link the mission of the church to economy and earth. However, it does not clarify the distinct nature of the church itself. In what ways is the church as *oikos* similar to the earth as *oikos*? In short, can the notion of the household of God (*oikos*) still offer a root metaphor for *ecclesiological* reflection? Or has ecumenical discourse arrived here in a dead end of theological confusion?

It should be clear that these questions call for a revisiting of (Protestant) discourse on the relationship between church, society, state and civil society. Since these are dominant themes in twentieth century Protestant theology, it would be unwise to take theological short cuts to redeem the *oikos* metaphor for ecclesiological reflection, without cognizance of what is at stake in this regard.

One may, of course, argue that all (theological) metaphors have limitations and suggest the need for a variety of metaphors. Indeed, the notion of the household of God may be complemented by discourse on the church as *ekklesia* or as *koinonia*.[27] However, simply switching from one metaphor to another would not facilitate and may actually evade detailed critical investigation. This would also underestimate the staying power of theological *root* metaphors – what I term "doctrinal keys".[28] Root metaphors, like scientific paradigms, cannot be simply invented. They provide an integrating power to entire theological discourses by suggesting a deep connection between the biblical roots of Christianity, its subsequent history and the contemporary situation. This is indicated by the legacy of soteriological concepts such as 1) the patristic notion of "victory over the powers" in a world where people felt threatened by cosmic forces, 2) the late medieval emphasis on God's forgiveness amidst an acute sense of guilt, 3) the Enlightenment faith in the enhancing powers of reason, knowledge, science, education, technology and development, 4) the concept of God's liberation amidst the forces of poverty and oppression and 5) contemporary discourse on a theology of reconstruction in the African context. The question is therefore whether the notion of the whole household of God may provide a suitable *root metaphor* for ecumenical Christianity in this century.

In this contribution I will subsequently opt to stay with the root metaphor of the household of God. I will explore the ecclesiological dimensions of the metaphor, namely with regard to the place and the mission of the church within God's household in conversation with four discourses. In the next section I will seek to fathom what is at stake in ecumenical discourse on the household of God by reflecting on the "Ecclesiology and Ethics" project of the World Council of Churches. In section 3 I will offer some reflections on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's notion of *sanctorum communio*, while section 4 will focus on Karl Barth's distinction between *Christusgemeinde* and *Bürgergemeinde.* The choice of these two texts is related to their distinct Christological focus, while the unity of God's household is maintained by avoiding any separation of church and society into two spheres. In reflecting on these highly influential and much discussed texts, I will adopt, where appropriate, the patristic strategy of *catenae* for a connected series of quotations and commentaries. In section 5.I will draw from selected contributions to ecclesiology from within contemporary African theology. Section 6 will offer some concluding comments.

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[27] These terms are, for example, discussed in the project on *Ecclesiology and Ethics* (see Best & Robra 1997).

[28] See footnote 2 above.

The World Council of Churches on 'Ecclesiology and Ethics'

"Imagine a mighty river waiting to be bridged. On each side are foundations already built, strong and secure, but different in materials, construction and appearance – and necessarily so, as the landscape and geological formations are different on the two sides of the river. Many doubt that a bridge can be built: The gap is too wide, the foundations may give way! Some argue that it would be too costly to build. Some on both sides would rather that it not be built, preferring not to encourage contact with the other side. Others insist that it must be built, arguing that much will be learned in the process, and that anyway there is crucial work to be done, work that can be done only by the two sides together." [29]

In 1992 the World Council of Churches commissioned a study project on "ecclesiology and ethics" to be conducted jointly by Faith and Order (Unit I) and Unit III (Justice, Peace and Creation). The aim of the project was to explore the link between what the church is and what the church does. The need for such a project was based on the perception that the ecumenical discourses on "Faith and Order" and on "Life and Work" have become disjointed. In ecumenical reflections on the mission of the church there is a tendency to underplay the distinct contribution which the church *as church* can make. Similarly, in ecumenical reflections on the nature of the faith and the order of the church there is a tendency to avoid controversies on what the mission (the social agenda) of the church in society entails. Although it seems obvious that any reflection on the faith and governance of the church should have significant ethical implications and that discourse on the social agenda of the church should draw on a theological understanding of the church,[30] this project gave ample evidence of the unresolved controversies in ecumenical discourse in this regard. This emerged at the three conferences on the theme of ecclesiology ethics, namely on "Costly unity" (Rønde, Denmark, 1993), on "Costly commitment" (Tantur, Israel, 1994) and on "Costly obedience" (Johannesburg, 1996). A concluding report, entitled *Ecclesiology and ethics: Ecumenical ethical engagement, moral formation and the nature of the church,* was published by the World Council of Churches in 1997.[31]

Before I analyse the report on *Ecclesiology and Ethics* it may be helpful to briefly explore some other contributions on the ecclesiological significance of the metaphor of the household of God.[32] It is interesting to observe that there are two contrasting routes which may be followed in this regard. These routes are related to two Greek words which are both derived from the root *oikeo*, namely *oikodomé* (the edification of the household) and *paroikia* (resident aliens). These routes also relate to an emphasis either on the nature or on the mission of the church, that is, on "ecclesiology" or on "ethics".

In his stimulating study, *God's Spirit: Transforming a world in crisis,* Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz developed the notion of "ecodomy", derived from the Greek word *oikodomé*. Ecodomy is the art of inhabiting instead of dominating the earth, our house. Müller-Fahrenholz explains: "In its literal sense this term refers to the building of the house, but its meaning can be extended to any constructive process. So the apostle Paul uses the word for the building up of Christian communities. He calls his apostolic mission a service to the *oikodomé* of Christ (2 Cor. 13:10). He reminds members of Christian communities that they

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29 Best & Robra 1997:vii.

30 The report on this project explores the relationships between themes such as *koinonia* and working for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation; covenant, moral communities and moral formation; and the recovery and strengthening of a Christian sense of identity (with reference to the liturgy and sacraments) amidst forces of malformation. See Best & Robra 1997.

31 Edited by Best & Robra (1997).

32 For the discussion below, see also my earlier contributions in this regard (Conradie 2000, 2004, 2005).

should behave towards each other in the spirit of *oikodomé* (Rom. 14:19). They are called to use their specific gifts and talents (charisms) for the *oikodomé* of the Body of Christ (Eph. 2:21), just as they are reinforced and strengthened by the pneumatic energy of this body."[33] Müller-Fahrenholz subsequently calls on Christian congregations to become ecodomical centres and to form ecodomical networks and covenants which can respond to the demands of the contemporary world. The calling of the church is to become partners in God's ecodomy.

Here we need to raise the question whether this description of the *mission* of the church in God's household also helps us to understand the *nature* of the church? What are the implications of an expansion of the connotations of the household from Christian communities to the "whole inhabited world"? How are Christian communities related to other groups who may share their ethical goals and values?

The position of Christian communities in society may also be characterised (see 1 Peter) with another concept which is derived from the word *oikos*, namely *paroikía*. This word literally means "living away from home".[34] The church is a community of "aliens and strangers" (*paroikoi* and *parepidemoi*), without citizen rights, in the world (1 Peter 2:11). The congregation is a "Gemeinschaft der gemeinsam Fremden".[35] God's elect people are strangers in the world (1 Pet 1:1) who are called to live their lives as strangers in reverent fear (1:17). Müller-Fahrenholz also recognises the need for an emphasis on the church as *paroikía* in society. He argues that, "It is understandable that some of the small and persecuted Christian groups began to see themselves as communities of aliens and exiles in a hostile world, whose true homeland was in the heavens (cf. 1 Pet. 2:11). Eventually each local Christian church came to be called a *paroikía*, a home away from home, as it were, a place of refuge."[36]

However, Müller-Fahrenholz regards this emphasis on the *paroikía* character of the church merely as an important corrective which becomes necessary whenever the primary ecodomical task of the church is threatened. He says: "There is an undeniable tension between *oikodomé* and *paroikía*. Whereas the former implies purpose and creativity, the latter tends towards separation of earth and heaven and fosters an escapist spirituality. But this need not be the case. The notion of *paroikía* is useful in underscoring that the followers of Christ can only be strangers in a world that rejects them. ... Ecodomical communities cannot be at peace with the violent powers that threaten to throw the world into chaos; rather they must seek to correct and transform a world in crisis."[37]

In a South African reformed contribution, Flip Theron acknowledges, with specific reference to Müller-Fahrenholz, that the emphasis on the *paroikía* character of the church may foster an escapist spirituality, but simply adds that this does not need to happen.[38] By contrast, Theron insists that the metaphor of the church as *paroikía* in society is of fundamental (instead of corrective) importance for an understanding of the nature of the church since it is (for him) a function of the eschatological character of the church. He thus recalls that, "The English 'parish', the Dutch 'parogie' and the German 'Pfarrer' which derive from this word (*paroikía*), still remind us that the church consists of 'resident aliens'. Training a

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33 Müller-Fahrenholz (1995:109).

34 Müller-Fahrenholz 1995:109.

35 See Theron (1997:261), with reference to the study by Reinhard Feldmeier.

36 Müller-Fahrenholz 1995:109. Meeks (1989:96) adds that "The message of 1 Peter is that the household of God offers these homeless people a home." They are not called to be homeless, but to come home.

37 Müller-Fahrenholz 1995:110.

38 Theron 1997:257.

'Pfarrer' involves training a 'foreigner'. The education of a parson, implies training for a *paroikía*."[39] He eloquently warns against the danger of the church becoming a mere reflection of society: "Quite understandably the church is always tempted to lay another foundation than the 'one already laid' namely the crucified Christ (1 Cor 3:11). That happens when it becomes fascinated by the isolated form of creation in stead of focusing on the *trans*-forming and therefore critical character of the creative Word of the cross. It then loses its *paroikía* character and becomes nothing more than a reflection of society. The salt has lost its saltiness. 'It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men' (Matt 5:13)."[40] Indeed, if the church would domesticate (pun intended!) the "strange new world" of the Bible (Barth), the message of the church would become a mere replica of other social movements in the context of civil society. Since I have discussed the theological roots of Theron's contribution elsewhere at some length,[41] it may only be necessary here to observe that Theron's main interest is in an understanding of the (eschatological) nature of the church. In his whole oeuvre he is less explicit on the mission and the social agenda of the church in society.

These contrasting views cast new light on references to the *oikos* metaphor in the project on "Ecclesiology and Ethics". In a section on moral formation in the report on *Costly commitment* the *oikos* metaphor is explicitly employed to find a way of describing the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics. It suggests that the *ekklesia* may be understood as a "household of faith" and notes that this may help to describe the ethical character of the church: The ethos of the household is "the way of life, the distinctive patterns of thinking and acting, which characterize those who live within the household."[42] The local household of faith is the place where such a way of life is nurtured. It then notes that the concept is helpful to relate the witness of the church within the economic and ecological realities of society, but also to the various households or families which make up the local church (the household as a "little church" – John Chrysostom) and the organisational patterns (allowing for a variety of charisma) and relations of power within Christian churches (the ordering of the church already constitutes an ethic, a way of being church in the world).

In the report on *Costly obedience* the term "household of life", referring to an "inclusive horizon of human belonging" in the context of "life together on this planet", is also used.[43] Nevertheless, this report deliberately avoids attempts at a grand ecumenical synthesis and emphasises, instead, the need for moral formation in particular, local Christian communities. This prompts the question how a sense of the *oikoumene* (the "locality" for the ecumenical church, namely the inhabited earth[44]) may be recovered. It notes that "the very word *oikoumene* seems to violate the post-modern preference for particularity, evoking as it does the notion of the unity of the human race in the household of God."[45] On this basis, the report recognises the challenges of formulating an ecumenical vision, of finding appropriate structures for ecumenical fellowship and of speaking an ecumenical language.

In these ways, "the notion of *oikos* mediates between the micro and the macro levels of human life and activity."[46] Unfortunately, the report fails to comment on the metaphorical

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39 Theron 1997:257.

40 Theron 1997:261-2.

41 See Conradie 2000, 2004, 2005.

42 Best & Robra 1997:43.

43 Best & Robra 1997:52. Elsewhere the report speaks of the church as such a moral "household of life" (1997:87).

44 Best & Robra 1997:76.

45 Best & Robra 1997:77.

46 Best & Robra 1997:44.

extension from the *Christian* family to the local community as a household *of faith,* to the management of the house (economy), the household of life, to the "whole household of God". Although the root (*oikos*) is present at all these levels, it is not clear what the "house" includes and excludes in each case and how it is constituted (by God, by faith, through ecumenical fellowship, by society, by offering a planetary habitat for humans, etc.).

These reflections on the "ecclesiology and ethics" project do not yet help to clarify how the nature and the distinctive mission of the church within the whole household of God may be understood. Such discourse at least indicates the complexity of the matter and the underlying tensions in this regard.

It should also be noted that the recent Faith and Order Paper No. 198 on *The nature and mission of the church: A stage on the way to a common statement* (2006) briefly mentions, but does not employ the notion of the household of God to any significant extent. It describes the church as a "sign and instrument of God's intention and plan for the world" and draws on the four images of the people of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Spirit and the fellowship of believers in this regard. Although it builds on the "Ecclesiology and Ethics" project, the document is far more detailed in its attempt to find ecumenical synergy on the nature of the church and somewhat less explicit on the mission of the church in the world.