
3. The Point of Church



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1st Edition

BIBLE STUDY

The New Testament has various images or metaphors to describe the Church. Each of them emphasises a particular facet but no one image offers a complete picture. It is important then to look at a number of metaphors and see what they offer for reflection on our current life as a Church.

Acts 2:42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Eph 2:19-22

¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Eph 4:11-13

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

1 Pet 2:4-5, 9-10

4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

Questions:

1. Begin by trying to name the various metaphors and images for Church described above. Which ones do you find most/least helpful and why?
2. According to these passages, why does the Church exist?
3. There is advice given here about worship, personal devotion, finances and resources, evangelism, fellowship, ministry and teaching and study. How does your congregational life compare? How do you account for the differences?
4. Are there activities or behaviours missing from these texts that are essential for Church life today? If so, what might they be?

Notes:

The Point of Church

The purpose of the Circuit and Local Church is laid out in the *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church (CPD)*.

500 Nature and Purposes. (1) The Circuit is the primary unit in which Local Churches express and experience their interconnexion in the Body of Christ, for purposes of mission, mutual encouragement and help. It is in the Circuit that presbyters, deacons and probationers are stationed

and local preachers are trained and admitted and exercise their calling. The purposes of the Circuit include the effective deployment of the resources of ministry, which include people, property and finance, as they relate to the Methodist churches in the Circuit, to churches of other denominations and to participation in the life of the communities served by the Circuit, including local schools and colleges, and in ecumenical work in the area including, where appropriate, the support of ecumenical Housing Associations.

600 The Nature of the Local Church. (1) The Church exists to exercise the whole ministry of Christ. The Local Church, with its membership and larger church community, exercises this ministry where it is and shares in the wider ministry of the Church in the world. In this one ministry worship, fellowship, pastoral care, mission and service are essential elements. Administration and training enable their fulfilment. In the Methodist Church these various tasks are undertaken by the Local Church, through its Church Council and committees, in union with the ministry of the Circuit of which it is a constituent. It is represented in the Circuit Meeting and represents it locally. It engages in ecumenical work including, where appropriate, the support of ecumenical Housing Associations.

Questions

1. What do you understand by the term 'interconnexion' and how is it experienced in your local congregation?
2. From these Standing Orders, are there distinctive responsibilities of the Local Church and the Circuit and, if so, what are they?

3. 'worship, fellowship, pastoral care, mission and service are essential elements. Administration and training enable their fulfilment.' Looking at your own congregation, and the Circuit, how well do you think you are doing in each of these areas? How might we improve?

Notes:

Together Towards Life (TTL) says this about the Church:

The church is a gift of God to the world for its transformation towards the kingdom of God. Its mission is to bring new life and announce the loving presence of God in our world. We must participate in God's mission in unity, overcoming the divisions and tensions that exist among us, so that the world may believe and all may be one (John 17:21). The church, as the communion of Christ's disciples, must become an inclusive community and exists to bring healing and reconciliation to the world. How can the church renew herself to be missional and move forward together towards life in its fullness?

Jesus promises that the last shall be first (Matt. 20:16). To the extent that the church practises radical hospitality to the estranged in society, it demonstrates commitment to embodying the values of the reign of God (Is. 58:6). To the extent that it denounces self-centredness as a way of life, it makes space for the reign of God to permeate human existence. To the extent that it renounces violence

in its physical, psychological, and spiritual manifestations both in personal interactions and in economic, political, and social systems, it testifies to the reign of God at work in the world.

The church is called to make present God's holy and life-affirming plan for the world revealed in Jesus Christ. This means rejecting values and practices which lead to the destruction of community. Christians are called to acknowledge the sinful nature of all forms of discrimination and to transform unjust structures. This call places certain expectations on the church. The church must refuse to harbour oppressive forces within its ranks, acting instead as a counter-cultural community. The biblical mandate to the covenant community in both testaments is characterized by the dictum "It shall not be so among you" (Matt. 20:26, KJV).

Activities

1. How does your congregation act as a 'counter-cultural community'? What is that experience like?
2. From these excerpts from TTL, how do you define the purpose of the Church?

Notes:

Discovering where we are

In the light of all you have read, spend some time, as individuals, filling in the grid below. Rank each activity 1-5, with 5 being excellent and 1 being inadequate. Do this for your local congregation and for the Circuit as a whole.

Activity	Local Church (1-5)	Circuit (1-5)
Worship		
Use of Resources & Money		
Evangelism		
Fellowship		
Teaching & Study		
Ministry & Service		

Now compare your results as a group. Discuss how you arrived at the number you gave and why there might be disparities between Local Church and Circuit. Also think about how inadequate activities might be improved.

Notes: