

What do we mean by “church”?

The New Testament uses the word ‘church’ in the following ways:

- a meeting of Jesus’ followers. This is the most common use of the word.
- a gathering of believers that meet in a house
- all believers in a particular locality – the people who belong to a group of believers even when they are not gathered together
- believers in a particular locality under the care of a group of elders
- all believers everywhere – the worldwide church.

There are common elements in all the descriptions of the church given in the New Testament. These are:

- The church consists of a group of people. (Note: the church is not about buildings.)
- The group of people are followers of Jesus Christ.
- The church is the community in which God lives by his Spirit.

The church is an expression of the heavenly congregation here on earth. It is God’s primary agent of transformation in the world. The key difference between the uses of the word ‘church’ given above is locality. For example, it can refer to a group of people meeting in a house or all believers everywhere. As the church is a community of people who follow Jesus Christ, it is appropriate that they meet with one another regularly.

It is not possible for all Christians worldwide to meet together, as lovely as that would be! Therefore, Christians need to meet together in smaller groups, usually in the area in which they live. The term we use for this grouping is ‘local church’. This term does not only refer to believers who meet together in a building which is constructed especially for that purpose. The ‘local church’ may meet in a community building, school hall or someone’s home. It is usually sustainable and should not be fully dependent on external funding, personnel or resources for its existence. Tearfund’s definition of local church is therefore a ‘Sustainable community of local Christian believers, accessible to all, where worship, discipleship, nurture and mission take place.’ On this website, we use the term ‘local church’ to refer to such groups and the word ‘church’ alone to refer to the wider body of Christ.

Source: *ROOTS 11: Partnering with the local church*, Tearfund 2007, page 7