

Defining the local church and its role

Before we look at how to work with the local church, it is necessary to define what we mean by the term '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.' In this book, we use the term 'local church' to refer to such groups and the word 'church' alone to refer to the wider body of Christ.

BIBLE STUDY

Characteristics of the local church

- Read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35.
- List all the attitudes and actions of God's people.
- Go through each item in the list and discuss their meaning. Some are straightforward, but others may need to be discussed in depth for their meaning and relevance. For example, the word 'devoted' gives a sense of a binding commitment or promise, similar to a wedding vow. In particular, discuss the meaning of these terms – the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42); the 'fellowship' (Acts 2:42); the 'breaking of bread' (Acts 2:42); 'everything in common' (Acts 2:44) and 'in heart and mind' (Acts 4:32).
- Is this what our local churches are like? If not, which characteristics are lacking and why?
- If we were first-century people who were not followers of Jesus Christ, how might we describe this group of people who met together regularly for worship and gave things away?
- Look at Acts 2:47, which says that the followers of Christ 'enjoyed the favour of all the people'. What does this mean? Is that the situation for Christians today? In our local situation, which characteristics of the early church should we follow more closely in order to be the church God wants us to be?

While recognising that local churches need leaders, the New Testament does not prescribe one specific way in which leaders (such as elders, overseers or deacons) and the churches they lead should relate to each other. As a result, it is not surprising that a variety of church structures or denominations have been formed over the centuries. Denominations and networks can be useful for pastoral accountability, sharing of learning, resources and gifts, and useful for enabling local churches to be heard at national level.

Christian leaders have argued over whether different structures are right or wrong, but history shows us that God can bless people through any Christian structure and that the godliness of the leader is far more important than the position they hold. History also witnesses to the fact that church structures can sometimes come to exist for their own ends. When this happens there is need to refocus the structure on its true purpose of building up local congregations of Christians.

The church is called to demonstrate the kingdom of God as a visible sign of his kingdom in the world. The church is called to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). The church should influence situations for the better, preserve good things and bring healing.

BIBLE STUDY

The role of the church: pictures of the church

■ Read 1 Peter 2:4-12. Peter uses a number of pictures of the church that indicate the church's role:

A spiritual house (verses 5-8). Peter uses the image of a building to describe God's people.

- *A cornerstone is a large stone supporting two walls at right angles to each other. What would happen to the building if the cornerstone was removed? Who is represented by the cornerstone? Why is it relevant that he is the cornerstone and not just any stone in the walls?*
- *Who do the other stones in the building represent? Notice that without these other stones, there would not be a building. We cannot be Christians in isolation – we must be together in community. The temple was the holiest place for Jews because it was seen as the dwelling place of God. People from all over the known world would travel to the temple to worship God. Likewise, the spiritual house exists so that people can meet with God.*

A holy priesthood (verse 5). In the Old Testament the role of a priest was to act as a go-between between God and the people of Israel. The priests took sacrifices from the people and presented them on the altar to God on their behalf. However, Jesus Christ's death and resurrection as the ultimate sacrifice means that there is no need for the Old Testament type of priest any more. In this passage, we see that all who trust in Jesus are holy priests.

Read verse 5.

- *What is the role of the holy priests described here?*

- *What are the spiritual sacrifices that we are to offer? To answer this question, look at the following passages: Romans 12:1; Ephesians 5:2; Philippians 4:18; Hebrews 13:15-16.*
- *Who benefits from these spiritual sacrifices?*

A holy nation (verse 9) Using the phrase 'holy nation' would immediately remind Jews of their own history, when the nation of Israel was saved out of slavery in Egypt. This was a model of what was to come when Jesus came to bring both Jews and Gentiles into God's kingdom.

- *Holy means 'set apart'. What do you think Peter means by referring to Christians as a holy nation?*

A people belonging to God

- *In what ways can we show we belong exclusively to God, who is King over all the earth? (see verses 9-12)*
- *What is the outcome of this? (verse 12)*

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

- *What does this Bible passage tell us about the role of the church?*
- *Does being different from the world mean being isolated from the world?*
- *How can our local church become more like the community of believers that Peter describes?*
- *How can Christian organisations encourage local churches to become more like the community of believers that Peter describes? Are there ways in which the actions of Christian organisations can actually hinder local churches from becoming what God intends them to be?*

The mission of the church: Integral mission¹

Poverty is multi-dimensional. It is about lacking basic needs. Often, people think of basic needs as merely physical – such as food, clothes and shelter. But there are other dimensions of poverty, such as social poverty (lack of opportunity to interact with other people), political poverty (lack of ability to influence people in positions of power) and spiritual poverty (lack of relationship with God through Jesus Christ).

By looking at poverty like this, we can say that most people in the world are poor in some way – occasionally, sometimes or all of the time. For example, someone who is materially rich could lack social networks or they may be in spiritual poverty. On the other hand, someone who is materially poor could have a supportive family and be a Christian, and therefore feel socially and spiritually rich.

The church is called to meet people's needs through loving them in the way that God loves them. The church is God's agent of transformation in communities. However, over the years, churches have interpreted their mission to love others in different ways:

- Some churches have focused only on the spiritual aspects of poverty. Their expression of love to the community has been in proclaiming the gospel.
- Some churches have expressed love through focusing on people's material needs without giving enough attention to spiritual needs. They demonstrate the gospel without necessarily proclaiming it.
- Some churches have actively been involved in addressing all types of needs but have failed to make the linkage between them. They have treated proclamation and demonstration of the gospel separately.

In this section we look at 'integral mission'. This term is used to describe the church's mission to meet people's needs in a multi-dimensional way. We argue that proclamation and demonstration of the gospel should not be separated. Integral mission is about speaking of and living out our faith in an undivided way, in all aspects of life. Without integral mission, the degree to which the kingdom of God can be shown and extended in this world can be limited.

Since churches tend to separate proclamation and demonstration of the gospel, we will explain integral mission in this section by showing why the separation should not be made.

¹ This section draws strongly on Tim Chester's work in his book *Good news to the poor*.

Explanation of terms used in this section

Proclamation means telling people the gospel, and is sometimes called ‘evangelism’.

Demonstration means showing people what it means to be part of God’s kingdom, such as through physically helping others to reduce poverty such as physical or political poverty. It is sometimes called ‘social action’ or ‘social involvement’ because it involves addressing needs in society.

The term **integral mission** comes from the Spanish ‘misión integral’ and can also be referred to as ‘holistic ministry’, ‘(w)holistic development’, ‘Christian development’ or ‘transformational development’.

Case study

Example of integral mission in northeast Brazil

A man in the village of Caroá in northeast Brazil heard about Jesus on radio programmes broadcast by Ação Evangélica (ACEV). He invited two pastors to speak in his village and as a result, 16 people became Christians.

As ACEV began to establish a church there, they saw that people needed access to safe water. Building a well posed a challenge – it was a new venture for ACEV’s evangelists. Yet they found that their practical work complemented their spiritual work. One community member commented, ‘The well started everything. It shows us that God loves us, and that through brothers and sisters in Christ, he blesses us.’

Since then, there have been many changes in the community, including an animal loan scheme, and government provision of a reservoir after advocacy work by the community. Now around half of the community members are Christians.



Photo: Jim Loring, Tearfund

A community member collects water from the well provided by ACEV.

The need for the church to be involved in demonstrating the gospel

Social involvement is part of what God expects Christians to do:

Social involvement is rooted in the character of God

God is concerned for people’s basic needs, whether spiritual or material. Social involvement is part of his character (for example, see Psalm 146:7-9). He opposes those who are responsible for injustice and sides with the victims of oppression. This does not mean that God is biased towards poor people and gives them preferential treatment. All people are important to God, shown in his grace to all people, whether rich or poor. However, in a world where there is bias towards the wealthy and powerful, God’s actions will always be seen as an opposite bias.

God’s character is most fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, who showed and preached concern for the poor (Luke 4:18-19; Matthew 4:23; Matthew 9:35-38; Matthew 14:14; Luke 12:33).

We are called to care for those around us

God expects us to mirror his concern for the oppressed (see Proverbs 31:8-9 and Isaiah 1:10-17). We are to care for those around us (Mark 12:28-34). Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), showing that we are to care for people across social and cultural divides.

Case study

Example of integral mission in the UK

In the UK, where the extended family is not as valued as elsewhere in the world, many elderly people feel lonely and isolated. Some are unable to go out due to illness, disability or age and therefore rarely have an opportunity to talk to other people.

Mount Florida Parish Church in Scotland went through Tearfund's Church, Community and Change process, which mobilises local churches in the UK to carry out integral mission. At the end of the process, it emerged that a key issue in Mount Florida was the loneliness of elderly people. The church therefore set up a 'befriending service' where volunteers regularly visit elderly people in their homes and, if appropriate, take them on outings.

This has helped to inspire self-worth and confidence in the elderly people. One person said, 'The rest of the day I am on my own, so it's good to get somebody to talk to ... to cheer me up.' Another person, who had been suffering from depression, found that being visited gave him a new interest in living and he began to ask the volunteer about her Christian faith.



The elderly people and their befrienders enjoy Christmas lunch together in the church hall.

Photo: Adele Robertson

The links between proclamation and demonstration of the gospel

There is a natural link between demonstration and proclamation:

- When proclamation of the gospel leads to repentance by those who respond to it, there are social implications. Jesus Christ becomes Lord over every area of their lives, so that there is transformation beyond the spiritual. In recognition of Christ's authority and through a desire to please him, Christians seek to reflect the justice and love of God in their own lifestyle and relationships, and in society as a whole. James 2:15-18 calls us to do good deeds to show evidence of our faith in Christ. Proclamation therefore leads to social involvement.
- This social involvement (demonstration), in turn, has consequences for proclamation as Christians bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.

We should always be aware of our motivation and what we are witnessing to, and ensure that this is communicated to those around us. Social involvement has to be an integral part of the mission of the church, but it is important that it is carried out alongside proclamation of the gospel. As the box opposite shows, social involvement complements proclamation, and proclamation complements social involvement. Christians are called to do both. We cannot do one in isolation from the other.

There is sometimes a tendency to separate the death and resurrection of Jesus from his earthly life. While his death and resurrection are of central importance, there is much that we can learn from Jesus' life and ministry on earth. His way of life and actions are a model for the mission of the church as much as his preaching. The Micah Declaration on Integral Mission states²: 'As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task.'

Proclamation and demonstration are inseparable

Proclamation is reinforced by our social involvement The gospel is interpreted in the context of the lives and actions of the people who share it and their relationships with one another. If a Christian tells someone the gospel, but does not display evidence of being a Christian through caring for others, the perceived value of the gospel to the person who hears it is weakened. Social involvement is an advertisement for God's kingdom where relationships with God and each other are restored (Matthew 5:14-16).

Social involvement acts as a signpost However, if done without communicating the gospel message, it can point people in the wrong direction:

- Rather than pointing to God, it can point to us.
- It can wrongly communicate that salvation is about doing good works.
- It can deny the importance of reconciliation with God by indicating that improving economic and social situations are all that matter.

Social involvement helps people in their earthly lives, but does not bring blessing beyond that.

NOTE: While it is important to proclaim the gospel as well as demonstrate it, people should never be forced to convert. Some religious groups may require people to convert to their religion so that they qualify for receiving aid. We believe that this is totally wrong. It is vital that Christians share unconditional love with everyone, through word and deed. Unwillingness to care for those of a different religion is denying God's grace towards us and towards them.

² The Micah Declaration was drawn up in 2001 at a meeting organised by the Micah Network, a coalition of evangelical churches and agencies from around the world which are committed to integral mission. For further details see www.micahnetwork.org

Case study

Example of integral mission in Mali

The small town of Diré in Mali has experienced desertification over the last few decades. A local Baptist church has taken action to fight the encroaching desert and ensure that some of the land remains cultivated. The church, with just 15 members, calls this the 'Good SEED' project. The ten-hectare plot of land is shared between eight local people who grow rice, millet, melons and vegetables.

In addition to enabling people to feed their families, the church hopes that the project will complement its evangelism by showing local people what Christians are really like. The Project Coordinator says, 'We are happy to share this land with other people because we love them... People believe false things about us... If they can work alongside us in the fields they find out what we are really like and what we really believe.' One community member commented, 'I am not yet a Christian myself, but my impression is that they are very good people, and what they teach is true.'



Photo: Richard Hanson, Tearfund

Church and community members cultivate the land together.

Case study

Example of integral mission in the Philippines

Peace and order was a big problem in one neighbourhood of Quezon City. Each day there were up to five killings among rival gangs of teenagers. A pastor decided to move into the dangerous area of the neighbourhood and live among the gangs. This was an initiative by the LIFE Project, which is a partnership between the local Batasan Bible Church and ISAAC, a Christian non-governmental organisation.

Gradually, as the pastor shared his life with the teenagers, they began to share their lives with him. The lives of many have been transformed. One ex-gang member says, 'The pastor modelled to us a better life. He was a mentor to us, teaching what was good and bad and we were filled with the Word of God.' Many of the teenagers did not attend school. Batasan Bible Church has helped them to study and gain diplomas. Before the project, the local shops would shut by six o'clock in the evening because of gang fighting at night. Now the shops stay open much later because the neighbourhood is so much more peaceful.



Photo: Jabez Production

Ex-gang members study for diplomas.

REFLECTION

- Do we agree with the definition of local church given in this book? Does it reflect our own perception of what 'local church' is in our community? If not, what is different?
- Is integral mission carried out by churches in our community? If not, is proclamation carried out without demonstration, or is demonstration carried out without proclamation?

Summary

- We have defined the local church as a 'sustainable community of local Christian believers, accessible to all, where worship, discipleship, nurture and mission take place.'
- We have discussed what integral mission is – speaking of and living out our faith in an undivided way in all aspects of life.
- We have identified integral mission as an important part of the local church's role.