



The Local Church

This document is the result of the “Ecclesia” task force led by Paul Klawitter with other members: Roy Angle, Jason Carmean, Gary McCaman, Eric Neifert, Ted Offutt, and Florent Varak.

Reasons for this Document

It would seem that everyone “knows” what a local church is. We think we know a group is a church when we see and experience it. Yet, if we were to ask ten people to define “local church,” we would likely get ten different answers. This document attempts to help us have clarity and unity in what we, as Encompass World Partners, mean when we use the term “church.”

It is also true that people tend to get very passionate about a particular model of church and, sadly, being quite convinced that it is the “biblical” model, might even disparage other models. We find this to be unhealthy and unproductive. We believe that the New

Testament has given us truths—essences and practices—for local churches, but has not given us a detailed specific model. This allows us to adapt and use different models in different cultural contexts. We hope that we all, within Encompass, can applaud and support differing expressions of God’s local church while holding common high standards of essence and practice.

Whatever form or model of church we pursue has a direct impact on what we do as missionaries. The model that we are using will largely dictate the activities that we are involved in. This is especially true as we develop local leadership and local structures.

Definitions of “Local Church”

Long-Form A local CHURCH (ekklesia) is a structured community of disciples/believers who trust solely in Jesus, practice unity with Jesus’s global family, celebrate the Trinity, and commit to helping one another bear fruit.

The community is shepherded by elders who ensure that disciples are equipped to love God and people, live and speak in obedience to Jesus’s Word, and participate in ministry and mission to the nations through the power of the Holy Spirit. This community is formally committed to each other, practice the ordinances of baptism and communion, and meet regularly. The use of the word “local,” refers to a church with members who live in proximity with each other and gather physically.

Simplified A local CHURCH is a loving community of “redeemed learners” (disciples) that meet together regularly and solely trust in Jesus for life and salvation, and who joyfully and respectfully celebrate the triune God by abiding in Him and in His Word while making it known to all nations. The members of the church identify themselves as a local church.

Much Simplified A local CHURCH is a formal community of disciples of Jesus who consider themselves a church, love each other and join together in obedience to Jesus’ mission to make disciples of all nations for Christ.

What a Church IS— The Essence of a Local Church

Though essence, function, and expression are inseparable, we have chosen to use these terms in the hopes of providing clarity. While expression should reflect the local culture, both essence and function can be used as ways to measure the health of our church-planting and equipping endeavors as well as to help us focus on what

we should be and do as church planters and equippers.

We are choosing to look at some of the direct statements made about the church and key metaphors used in the New Testament to help us understand, “What is a local church?”

How the CHURCH should be equipped to LIVE

Vine & Branches: Abide in Christ

This isn't so much a metaphor of the church (the community of disciples), but rather a metaphor for discipleship. The goal is for each believer (branch) to be directly connected to Jesus (the vine) instead of some other object. While other believers can play a role in someone's spiritual development and other resources can be useful, Jesus followers must never put anything else between themselves (the branch) and Jesus. A branch will not—and cannot—bear fruit unless it is firmly connected to the vine.

John 15:1–12

Body of Christ: Practice unity while embracing diversity

The church is made up of many members united in one body, with Christ as their head. The members have different gifts and functions that are to be used collaboratively to serve one another for the common good. There are no unimportant members, and if one member suffers, they all suffer.

Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12:4–27; Ephesians 2:16, 4:1–16; Colossians 3:15; 1 Peter 4:10–11

Temple: Worship God through holy, Spirit-filled lives

The church is a holy temple—the dwelling place of the Spirit of God. In the Old Testament, the tabernacle and temple were known as the house of God—where God dwelt and people could come worship and make sacrifices while treating Him as holy. Today, the church is the temple of God, which is composed of “living stones.” We are to be holy and worshipful. When people come into our midst, they are coming into the dwelling place of God.

Ephesians 2:19–22; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16; 1 Peter 2:5

Flock: Be led by selfless, nurturing servants

The church is a flock of vulnerable sheep under the nurturing care and protection of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Elders are to provide care and

oversight for the flock. They are not there to abuse the sheep, but to be examples.

John 10; Acts 20:28–30; 1 Peter 5:1–4

New Humanity: Live as a free sample of the Kingdom

Humanity was created in the image of God to reflect His character and rule with Him. Then came the fall, which spiraled “Humanity 1.0” deeper and deeper into violence, oppression, greed, abuse, and coercion. What was needed was a new creation: “Humanity 2.0.” The church is a new creation—the beginning of a new humanity living out Kingdom values—and we should be characterized by righteousness, holiness, truth, compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, and unity.

Ephesians 2:15, 4:22–24; Colossians 3:4–15

The Bride: Demonstrate loving, submissive, mutual commitment

The Body of Christ shares one flesh with Jesus and enjoys an intimate relationship with Him. She is both nourished and cherished. She is to be pure, doing righteous deeds as she anxiously awaits the coming of the bridegroom.

2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22; Rev. 19:7; 22:17

Family (Household) of God: Be centered on Christ

There is no Greek or Hebrew word that corresponds to our western concept of the nuclear family (husband, wife, and children), but rather the extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.) who often lived together under the same roof (but not always). Indeed, households (oikos) also included artisans, servants, and slaves. We have one Father who has many sons and daughters, which means we have many brothers and sisters. We are family, and family takes care of family.

Romans 8:16; Galatians 3:28, 4:5; Ephesians 1:5, 5:1; 1 Timothy 5:4–8; 1 John 3:1–2

What the CHURCH should be equipped to DO (The Functions of a church – key characteristics)

Love God and others

(Matthew 22:37-39,
Galatians 5:14)

Obey the commands of God

(John 14:21)

Gather together with order, structure, and systems

(Hebrews 10:25, 1 Corinthians 14:40)

Go and send disciples on mission to the nations

(apostolic Matthew 28:18,
Acts 1:8, Ephesians 4:11)

Makes disciples through evangelism, baptism, and teaching believers to obey Jesus

(Matthew 28:19-20)

Equip disciples for life, ministry, and mission

(Ephesians 4:11,
2 Timothy 2:2)

Appoint elders and deacons as leaders who serve

(Acts 6:1-7, 14:23, Titus 1:5,
1 Timothy 3:1-13)

Care for, protect, and involve disciples

(Acts 20:28,
1 Corinthians 14:26)

Teach the Bible

(Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 14:26, Colossians 3:16)

Interrelate one with another

(κοινωνια Ac 2:42; αλληλων exhortations
Hebrews 10:24-25)

Worship and thank Christ

(Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 10-11, Ephesians 5:19-20,
Colossians 3:16-17)

Pray

(Luke 10:2, Acts 2:42,
Ephesians 6:18)

Practice symbolic acts (baptism, Lord's supper, anointing with oil)

(Matthew 28:18-20,
John 13:1-17, 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, James 5:14-15)

Care for the marginalized such as widows, orphans, and others who are vulnerable, especially within the Church

(James 1:27, Acts 10:1-11:18,
Ephesians 2:11-22)

Do good

(Titus 3:1)

Summary of New Testament teaching on what local churches DO:

They commit to gather together around the scriptures, for fellowship, worship, baptism and communion, and prayer.

They practice all of the "one another" exhortations: do good, appoint elders and deacons, employ the Spirit's gifts to edify and equip believers, and pursue the ministry and mission of the church to "make disciples of all nations."

Church Models

We see two primary current models of a local church: **Maximalist and Minimalist** (with many variants of the two). In reality, there is a continuum of models with the “Maximalist” and “Minimalist” representing two ends of a continuum. Most churches lie somewhere on this continuum and often do not lie perfectly at either end.

We are using the terms Maximalist and Minimalist purposefully to avoid the baggage of other terms. It is important to realize that any church model has inherent strengths and weaknesses. The better we understand these, the better we can lean into the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses.

Maximalist

A Maximalist church is typically characterized by:

- highly educated lead pastors and possibly other pastoral staff (usually paid)
- many programs to meet the needs of the church and reach out to the lost
- formal church services with an emphasis on pulpit preaching and high level worship through song
- having a church building or seeking to have one
- church planting that starts with a formal “launch” and a strong church core from the beginning

Minimalist

A Minimalist church is typically characterized by:

- lack of requirements for formal theological education of leaders
- very few, if any programs
- high emphasis on relational gathering and inductive Bible learning
- a strong emphasis on personal mentoring for leadership development
- gatherings are simple and relational – think a circle of chairs rather than a pulpit and rows of chairs
- church planting that starts small without the goal of becoming big

Maximalist Churches: Strengths and Weaknesses

Typical Strengths

The church starts with and has well trained, specialized leaders, which results in quality teaching.

When leadership is paid, they are able to have focused time and energy.

This is an understandable church-planting model for westerners and the church model is easily recognizable.

Structures are clear.

Programs and music meet the needs of the church community. Children's and other specialty programs can also be helpful in drawing people in.

The size and structures can help promote and finance international missions.

The size and structure can allow people to "check out church" and remain anonymous while they do so.

This model provides a strong sense of identity for its members.

Typical Weaknesses

Leaders (pastors) often have to be found from the outside—i.e. search committees for new pastors. This tends to create a clergy/laity separation. Leadership is for professionals. Leadership expectations (seminary, etc.) can be extrabiblical.

Because of the high expectations on leadership and the cost of salaries, multiplication is typically slow.

This model may not fit in all contexts globally where there is little to no historical church.

For some, the structures can dominate the focus, which minimizes the church's essence and purpose.

Internal programs and music require a lot of time and energy that could otherwise be spent on relational outreach to lost people. Programs can be expensive.

Size and structure can allow people to "check out church" and remain anonymous while they do so.

Minimalist Churches: Strengths and Weaknesses

Typical Strengths

The church emphasizes strong relationships.

This model is flexible and nimble.

They can have additional financial resources since money is not used for buildings and paid pastors.

They have high levels of participation, which emphasizes and embodies the priesthood of believers.

This model has a local focus.

Requirements for leadership are lower, so opportunities to lead and develop are more accessible.

There is an emphasis on spending time with non-believers and not on programs.

There's an emphasis on transformational discipleship and more personal interaction with God's Word when meeting.

This model does not require a large number of existing believers to start a church. This is especially helpful in least-reached locations.

Typical Weaknesses

The church can be strongly ideological. (For example: "Traditional church is unbiblical.")

This model can fail to meet expectations for music and children's programs.

With leaders typically being bi-vocational, time to focus on the church can be very limited. Church leadership can be forced to take place in the margins, and leaders can easily burn out.

This model does not fit all contexts—especially churched contexts that have certain expectations.

This model has difficulty raising finances for global missions.

Identity with the global church can be weak with no larger gathering.

It's difficult to organize big group events and activities useful for both believers and non-believers.

This model can de-emphasize the power of good preaching.

There is a lack of stability & longevity.

Attitudes

Our hope is that we would have certain attitudes when seeking the Lord for the model or form of church that we will be planting or equipping. We should be curious and investigate what form would best serve the people and place where we are ministering. We should approach our own ministry's and others' teachability and humility knowing that we all have things to learn.

As long as a church is living out the essence of church and does what biblical churches do, we should value models that differ from our own and be supportive and respectful of others as they seek to glorify Christ through their local church.

Resources / Bibliography

Books recommended by task force members:

- Allison, Gregg R: *Sojourners and Strangers, the Doctrine of the Church*
- Banks, Robert: *Paul's Idea of Community*
- Cole, Neil: *Church 3.0*
- DeYoung, Kevin and Greg Gilbert: *What is the Mission of the Church?*
- Dever, Mark: *The Deliberate Church*
- Dever, Mark: *9 Marks of a Healthy Church*
- Jethani, Sky: *How Churches Became Cruise Ships: A Survival Guide for the Seasick Christian*
- Keller, Carson: *Center Church*
- Murray, Stuart: *Church After Christendom*
- Payne, JD: *Apostolic Church Planting*
- Platt, David: *Follow Me*
- Strauch, Alexander: *Biblical Eldership*
- Woodward, JR, White, Dan Jr: *The Church as Movement*
- Wright, Christopher: *The Mission of God's People*

Biblical metaphors & scripture references

- **Body of Christ** (Ephesians 4:15, 1 Corinthians 12:12, 27)
- **Household or family of God** (Ephesians 2:19; 3:15; 4:6)
- **A building** (1 Corinthians 3:10–15; Ephesians 2:21)
- **A royal priesthood and a holy nation** (1 Peter 2:9)
- **Temple of God** (Ephesians 2:21f.; cf. John 2:19f.; 1 Corinthians 3:9; 1 Peter 2:4f.)
- **Planting / field of God to bring forth fruit to His glory** (1 Corinthians 3:9; cf. John 15:1f.)
- **Vine and branches** (John 15–17)
- **Bride of Christ** (Ephesians 5:25)
- **A golden lampstand** (Revelation 1:20)
- **Pillar and support of the truth** (1 Timothy 3:15)
- **New Man [new humanity]** (Ephesians 2:15)
- **Elect exiles** (1 Peter 1:1)
- **A spiritual house** (1 Peter 2:5)
- **Living stones** (1 Peter 2:5)
- **A city on a hill, salt and light** (Matthew 5:13)
- **A shepherd and his flock** (John 10:1–18)
- **A wild olive branch** (Romans 11:17)
- **Dough** (1 Corinthians 5:6–7)
- **An ambassador** (2 Corinthians 5:20)
- **A virgin** (2 Corinthians 11:2)
- **A chosen lady** (2 John 1)
- **People or Israel of God** (Ephesians 2:12; cf. 1 Peter 2:9–10)

Lexical definitions

- Ekklesia (ἐκκλησία BAGD lexicon 240-241) :
- Assembly, as a regularly summoned political body
- The congregation of the Israelites
- Of the Christian church or congregation, a church meeting (but also of the community of Pythagoras)
- The church or congregation as the totality of Christians living in one place
- Of house-churches
- The church universal to which all believers belong