



FAITH Questions

SESSION 3: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH?



Session Activities

Aim: To explore the purpose of the church, its roots in the bible, and what that means for us today.

This whole session may open some difficult or challenging conversations from the participants in your group. You may be aware that this may be a difficult thing to discuss for some people in your group, or that there are things in their past that may be painful. It is not the place of this resource to tell you how to deal with such things, but showing an awareness and sensitivity that this could be a difficult topic could be important for people's engagement.

INTRODUCING

There is an important distinction to make in this session between the ideal and the reality. With that in mind, this initial activity is aimed at helping the group to put aside their potential frustrations with the church, and instead think about the ideal purpose of the church.

Give each person the 'Church' printout, and give them two minutes to write all the words that come to mind when they think about church.

After the two minutes, have everyone come back together to share the ideas. Have a whiteboard or flipchart divided into three sections. Label the sections:

- Positive
- Negative
- Neutral

Or, if you think it would be more helpful

- Worship
- Discipleship
- Growing community
- Serving others
- Other

Divide the suggestions from the group between these divisions. Reflect on where most of the suggestions are, and where there are less. Is there a particular way of describing your group's view of church taking these as an overview?

Put these aside for the moment, and we will return to them later in the session.

EXPLORING

What is the purpose of the church?

“Whenever the church is talked about today, it is usually about one of two things. Either it is the fact that the church is in decline, or it is that the church is behind the curve on some issue or another in our culture.

Occasionally the incredible work of the church in serving local communities is talked about, but these are few and far between. But this rare category of story is where we see much more clearly what the church should be, and what it could be.

There is a day we celebrate in the church calendar, across traditions and denominations, when we remember the birth of the church, when it moved from being a few followers of Jesus hiding in an upstairs room, to thousands of people in the city becoming part of this new movement. From there the church grew and expanded, until it arrived not long after in the beating heart of the roman empire. This day is called Pentecost.

There is a key bit of information in this story which gives us a clue as to the real purpose and calling of the church. When the disciples came out of that upstairs room in Acts 2, they were babbling, and sounded to those who were listening like they were drunk. They weren’t drunk, they were speaking in the languages of all those present, so that each one could understand what was being said for themselves.

There is another story about babbling in the bible, right back near the start in Genesis. The people all gathered together and wanted to do something to show how mighty and powerful they were, and so they worked together to build an enormous tower that reached to the heavens. But God saw what they were doing, and saw that they were only interested in power and glory, so he confused their languages and they could no longer work together. At this point in the Bible’s story, the people go their different ways, divided by language.

And in Acts 2, we see the start of this being undone. People are not divided by language but united by it. They are drawn into a community of a united faith, that believes in a humanity united in bringing into reality the world that God intended.

The Church then, is meant to be the first taste of the world that God wants. We are meant to be united in bringing goodness, wholeness, peace, and love into the world, and to draw others into this community. Often the church falls short of this, but this is what we are to aspire to.'

After the video, ask the group to highlight anything that was new information for them. Was there anything that particularly stood out as important or significant?

The video speaks about the world that God wants. Can your group describe what such a world might look like?

EXPANDING

The video points towards an idea of church that is idealised, and attractive, but which might not chime with our experience of being part of church. It doesn't chime with the way that those outside the church see it either.

How do your group think the wider world see the church?

Using the 'Church in the media' cards, have the group see if they can put them in the order of recurrence or frequency of the type of story they come across:

Content for Church and Media Cards:

While these topics are gathered from a survey of media by the Comms team at Church House, there isn't a correct order to have these in. Rather the interest in this activity lies in what the group think the majority of stories about the church in the media are.

- Once the group have put them in an order, ask them if they have put positive or negative stories near the top.
- Have they put positive or negative stories near the bottom?
- Overall, what impression do they think the church makes in the media? Is this impression linked to the Church's place as a place where God's way is experienced and lived?
 - » It's also worth pointing out that even the positive points on the list aren't particularly inspiring, but instead are what we would expect of pretty much any institution in the modern world.

Going Deeper

The thing that makes the church unique is that it is made up of people who:

- Love Jesus
- Want to share His love with the world.

These things should be at the core of all that we do as a community. As you come to the end of this session, you could bring the groups thoughts together around one of the following points:

- Thinking about the things you do as a church, are your activities focused on one or the other of the things that make the church unique?
- If someone was cynical or negative about church, how would you explain being part of a church to them in light of what has been covered in this session?
- What are some of the barriers for those outside the church that might want to become part of our communities?

A good way of doing this could be to look at Acts 1:13-14 and Acts 2:42-47. These passages are descriptions of the early church before and after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Split the group into smaller groups and give them the references above, and have them write down the characteristics of the church before and after the Holy Spirit came. Feedback together and reflect on whether the church you are part of fits one or the other description better. This might be quite a challenging or uncomfortable activity, so give plenty of time to the potential discussion coming out of it.

PRAYING

Using the Church printout again, give each participant a pen and invite them to write down words that reflect their:

- Positive experiences of Church
- Negative experiences of Church
- Frustration with Church

Once they have done so, read through Acts 2:42-47 again, and ask God to highlight to you the things you can do as a community to become more like that description of the early church. Pray for God's Spirit to help you do those things, and to make sure He is at the center of your life of faith as a community.