



# THE CHURCH: What is it and why does it exist? Facilitator's Guide

COMMUNITY

## 🎯 OVERVIEW:

In this lesson, students will learn about the universal and institutional church. They'll discover that church isn't a building, and it's not just about robotically attending on Sunday mornings. It's the body of Christ, put on earth for a mission. They'll learn whom the church exists to serve and why the church should be focused both outwardly and inwardly. Through a series of hypothetical scenarios, they'll put their newfound understanding of church to the test.

## ? OPENING QUESTIONS:

- What does "church" mean to you?
- Does the word "church" bring up positive or negative thoughts in your mind?

## 💬 WHAT THE BIBLE HAS TO SAY ABOUT IT:

You probably know most of the standard names for groups of animals. Wolves travel in packs. Sheep gather in herds. But a few of these animal-group names may surprise you: a parliament of owls, a sloth of bears, a bloat of hippos, a tower of giraffes, a murder of ravens, a gang of elk, and a streak of tigers. The Bible makes it clear that Christ-followers should live in community. But what do you call a group of believers? They're a church. You've probably heard the word "church" used to describe the building in which a group of Christ-followers meets. But that's not really it. The actual church is the group of people meeting there, and a church can move from one building to another.

But even that doesn't quite get to the bottom of what the Bible calls "the church." In reality, the church is made up of every single follower of Christ who ever lived or ever will live. That's a huge number of people, and there's no way to count how many people really make up the church. Think of it this way: McDonalds is a gigantic, multinational corporation employing almost 2 million people at over 35,000 locations. But when you tell your friends to meet you at "McDonalds," you actually mean the specific, local franchise location. That's why Christ-followers can be part of the universal church and a member of a local church. And just as McDonalds exists to serve people food quickly and cheaply, the church (both universal and local) has a mission, too.

**LEADER'S NOTE:** One of the most common ways that people talk about the difference between their specific, local church and the universal church (everyone who follows Christ) is by calling them the "little-c church"—the local church—and the "big-C Church"—the universal church. The universal church has a mission that all local churches should be working toward: making and developing disciples and blessing the world. Local churches often have more specific goals or missions that fit into the larger mission of the universal church. For example, an inner-city church in Chicago will go about making disciples differently than a rural church in Kenya, but they are on the same mission of the overall "big-C" Church.





Lots of people see going to church as a formality, a ritual, a thing you do because you're supposed to. But Christ wants the church to be much more than a Sunday-morning obligation. The church has a role to play in the world. Emil Brunner put it this way: "The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning."<sup>1</sup> In other words, if a church isn't pursuing its mission, it's not really a church. So, what is the church's mission? You'll find out in the following Bible passage.

**Read:** Ephesians 4:1–16

**LEADER'S NOTE:** The apostle Paul wrote the book of Ephesians as a letter to the church in Ephesus. He was trying to pass on the basics of what church is and how it works. At this point, the church had only existed for a little while, since the whole concept and practice of church didn't start until Jesus returned to heaven and established its mission (the Great Commission). But even before that, he had trained his disciples to lead the way. Paul was trained by people who knew Jesus personally. He traveled all over the place as a missionary starting churches. He had to cover a lot of the basics in this letter—like what it means to be a church, how to live in community as disciples of Jesus, and how to be the "body" of Christ to the rest of the world.

**Discuss:**

- According to Ephesians, what does it mean to be the church or Christian community?
- What do verses 12 and 13 say about the mission of the church?
- As an important member of the church, how are you doing at helping to fulfill its mission? Are you living out the challenge Paul gives you in the first verse?

**\* A SECOND LOOK:**

Claire was a normal, extraverted young woman. But one day, while shopping, she started shaking and felt faint. She had to crouch down to keep from falling over. A doctor told her it was probably just stress (she'd recently married and started a new job), so she kept up her usual routine, avoiding the area where she'd had the panic attack. But she started having these attacks in other places. Whenever that happened, she'd just stop going to the place where she felt anxiety. Soon, she couldn't even go out into her garden. She left her job and confined herself to the safety of her house for two-and-a-half years, spending her days watching TV, surfing the Internet, and caring for her wheelchair-bound husband. Her elderly neighbors did all the shopping for her. Every morning, she'd wake up with her heart pounding, scared of what might happen if she left the house. She had what psychiatrists call "agoraphobia"—the fear of the outside. It was a miserable way to live.

In some ways, churches can be agoraphobic, too. They become so inward-focused, so scared of what and who they might encounter, that they turn their backs on the outside world. They focus solely on the people already in their church community. But that's not healthy. Jesus called the church to "go and make disciples of all nations," (Matt. 28:19). That means leaving the safety and comfort of the community you know to interact with people who may shock us in places that make us nervous.



This doesn't mean that churches should swing the complete other way and trade all their inward focus for an outward focus. It's not enough to reach out to others without taking care of those already in the church. But, Christ-followers will actually do a better job of journeying out into the world if they're cared for by the others in their church. When Jesus said to "make disciples," he had two things in mind: reaching out to people who don't yet know Jesus, and helping those who already know him to be the best disciples they can be.

**LEADER'S NOTE:** Agoraphobia is more than just "disliking the outdoors." It's a serious anxiety disorder from which over 3 million people in the U.S. suffer. As you work through this section, be sure to show sensitivity to any students who may experience or know someone who experiences agoraphobia. If one of your students has been affected by agoraphobia in some way, it might be helpful to have them describe their experience to the other students (but only if they're comfortable doing so—many who suffer from this disorder wish to remain anonymous).

### **Discuss:**

- Should the church be outward or inward-focused? Why?
- Do you feel spiritually agoraphobic (afraid of the outside) when it comes to reaching those outside the church? What scares you most about the world beyond your church?
- Do you neglect the people who are already in your church? How could you work harder to take care of your fellow Christ-followers?

### **LIVE IT OUT: Hypothetical Church Scenarios**

Split students into groups of five to seven. (Based on your timeframe or relevance, you may want to choose the scenarios that most apply to your group.)

### **Say something like:**

*In light of what we've learned about the church, I'm going to give you a few scenarios. Some may seem radical, but others aren't that far-fetched. For each scenario, answer the questions that follow in your group.*

**LEADER'S NOTE:** As you listen to your students' answers, pay attention to what they are really revealing about their beliefs on community and the importance of church as the body of Christ. Get a barometer reading on their value for church so you know how to grow and challenge these beliefs before they head off into a new place after high school.



Scenario 1: The government decides to close all churches and suspend religious freedom.

- *Would you still attend church? Why or why not? If so, how?*
- *Would you still be a part of Christ's church? Why or why not?*

Scenario 2: The government decides that all people must attend church because it will make citizens better people.

- *Would you still attend church? Why or why not?*
- *Would these government-mandated churches still truly be churches? Why or why not?*

Scenario 3: All of your friends think church is boring and decide to never go again.

- *Would you still be involved in a church? Why or why not?*
- *What would you say to these friends after they stopped?*

Scenario 4: You graduate high school and move to a new place where you don't know anyone. Would you still get involved in a new church? Why or why not?

- *If so, how would you go about finding a new church to join? What would be most important to you in choosing a church?*

Scenario 5: A friend tells you that he doesn't need to attend a local church because he can worship God and read the Bible any time he wants by himself.

- *Is your friend still in church even though he's by himself and not in a church building? Why or why not?*
- *What would you say to your friend?*

Scenario 6: A friend tells you that she doesn't need to be involved in a local church because he has church with a group of friends at a local coffee shop on Tuesday nights.

- *Is your friend's coffee shop meeting a church?*
- *What would you say to your friend?*

Scenario 7: A friend tells you that he's been hurt by the church. She still follows Jesus, but she doesn't consider herself to be a part of the church.

- *Is your friend still a part of the church? Why or why not?*
- *How would you respond to your friend?*

Scenario 8: A friend of yours attends church every Sunday, but she tells you that she doesn't actually believe that Jesus died and rose again.

- *Is your friend still a part of the church? Why or why not?*
- *How would you respond to your friend?*



### APPLY IT:

Write down one way you are going to apply what you now know about the church and about being a solid member of the church that lives worthy. Think of something you can do this week to grow in this area.

#### **Be specific:**

What are you going to do?

When are you going to do it?

Is there someone who can keep you accountable?

**LEADER'S NOTE:** Whenever students make applications, challenge them to be specific. It's one thing to say, "I'm going to trust God more." The truth is, our students won't really know if they did this, or if they grew in trust over the week. It's another thing to say, "Every morning this week before I eat breakfast, I'm going to tell God that today is his and that I trust him, and I'm going to ask him to give me the strength to replace worries with trust." Challenge your students to answer the questions under the "Be Specific" section. You can even have them pair up, share their applications, and ask for accountability from their partner.



### THINK ABOUT IT:

"And I believe that being a part of the church means giving up a sense of ownership of anything and any sense of individual rights, because ultimately it's about love of the other and taking on the servant posture of a crucified Christ." – Enuma Okoro<sup>2</sup>

"The church is the church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>3</sup>

\*\*\*Any reference within this piece to Internet addresses of websites not under the administration of LeaderTreks is not to be taken as an endorsement of these websites by LeaderTreks; neither does LeaderTreks vouch for their content.

<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1931), 108.

<sup>2</sup> Enuma Okoro, *Reluctant Pilgrim: A Moody, Somewhat Self-Indulgent Introvert's Search for Spiritual Community*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), Kindle edition.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters & Papers from Prison*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), Kindle edition.