



# THE CHURCH:

## What is it and why does it exist?

### Student Guide

COMMUNITY

- 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.

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.” 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

#### **Answer:**

- 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.

### **Answer:**

- 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?



### 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?



### 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

“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

