

What should the church to look like

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What should the church to look like?

The church is depicted by Paul as the Body of Christ – each part joined in love and functioning in relation to the whole to embody Jesus in our communities (1 Cor 12). But generations of church practices have entrenched "church" as a producer / consumer relationship between the leaders and the congregation. In addition our consumer society has encouraged people to view church as a service-provider resulting in pick-and-choose and take-it-or-leave-it attitudes.

The relevance of the church has also been curtailed by reducing the Gospel to the Cross instead of preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom that Jesus told us to proclaim.

For several years I have been saying that Jesus never told us to run churches, but to love one another and go and make disciples. In Jesus' ministry and that of the early church, both of these commands were worked out in deeply relational community. As a consequence we have been promoting Growth Groups as a very effective means of loving and making disciples.

I now want to address a fundamental question: what did Jesus intend the church to look like?

Troubling Traditions

Jesus said, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!” Mark 7:9. We are often blind to our own traditions and jump to defend them when challenged.

Many styles of church have been tried, including house church, Cell Church, Alternative Worship, Seeker-Friendly, concert-style, night-club style, Messy Church, Café Church and more. Each of these has started with the concept of a worship service and tried to find more culturally relevant ways of doing worship in the hope that non-Christians might be persuaded to come and see.

But even Christians struggle with church! In recent weeks I have had Christians from three different generations tell me that church is not working for them.

Have we simply been following the traditions of men? Who said that a church gathering should be a worship service? What would happen if we allowed ourselves to completely reimagine church from the start? That is extremely difficult because the word “church” has generations of meaning behind it. So let’s not even talk about church. Let’s ban that word for the sake of this exercise, and instead let’s talk about Missional Communities.

Missional Communities

We have already established our starting point in two important discoveries:

1. Jesus never told us to run church services; He sent us to make obedient disciples.
2. The Gospel Jesus preached was depicted by His life, not His death.

When we come to the Gospels to learn from Jesus about what a Missional Community might look like, we are struck by the observation that God the Father is the Great Missionary. This is not a story of men finding God, but of God seeking and drawing men to Himself. The whole bible proclaims this from cover to cover. That shows us that a Missional Community sees God and the world differently:

1. God is seen as the Missional God, reaching into our communities in manifold ways to set them free in His Kingdom.
2. Our mission, therefore, is to help our friends recognize how God is at work in their lives and to help them cooperate with Him.

So if God is the Missionary and our role is to “water” what God is doing, how do we do that? Jesus makes this very clear: live a Kingdom life and proclaim the presence of the Kingdom. In other words, love one another – and love those who do not yet know Jesus – and invite them to share in God’s kingdom too. Therefore a Missional Community sees themselves differently:

1. The starting point is the formation of a culturally appropriate community, rather than a *service*. Sharing all of our lives in transparent honesty is our act of worship.
2. Our mission is to transform our society through demonstrating the Kingdom of God.

Gathering round a Breaking Bread Meal

It's not too difficult to create small communities – our wider communities probably have many already. In our village we have groups for craft, singing, running, walking, dancing, photography, book-swap, reading, cinema, football ... the list goes on. Some of these groups are run by churches or individual Christians. But how do we create a Missional Community?

I feel that centring a Missional Community around the Breaking of Bread is important for several reasons:

- Jesus commanded it at the Last Supper.
- As a remembrance of His death it reminds us that God is the Father, sending His Son to us. And as the Father reached out to us in Jesus, so we also are to be an outward reaching community. Through us God reaches out to others in love.
- As a proper meal, rather than a token meal, it emphasises to us that we need to feed on Him, just like we feed on the bread. We must eat and drink Him so He lives in and through us.
- The meal has a past, present and future aspect. It looks back to the Cross; celebrates His presence with us now; and looks forward to the fullness of the Kingdom.

But here is a most important point that we tend to miss. Jesus said he would not eat again with his disciples until the Kingdom had come (Luke 22:18). And yet after the resurrection Jesus is recorded as eating again and again with his disciples.

Jesus was making the point that the Kingdom has now come. Our meal is therefore about the presence of the Kingdom. We live out the Kingdom and invite others to take part.

Although traditionally the Breaking of Bread has been restricted to believers, there is no suggestion in the Gospels or the letters that the church should close its doors to unbelievers when sharing this meal. Indeed, the early church viewed the Breaking of Bread as central to mission. In 362AD Julian II, Emperor of Rome, wrote this about the Christians: "These impious Galileans not only feed their own poor, **but ours also**; welcoming them into their agapae (their Breaking Bread meal), they attract them, as children are attracted, with cakes." Pagans were invited to share in the Breaking of Bread meals and thereby came to

faith. The agapae meal was a celebration *and demonstration* of God reaching out to a broken world in Jesus and through His death establishing the means of forgiveness and restoration.

Simple churches around the world have proved how effective a shared meal is at creating community with not-yet-believers and make it an essential part of their gatherings.

What does it look like?

So if we start with the Jesus-ordained ingredient of the Breaking Bread meal, what else can we say about a Missional Community? Well I think we can agree it needs to be:

- Enjoyable to the extent that people are enthusiastic about inviting others to come.
- Jesus centred so that conversations about Jesus are easy to initiate.
- Non-denominational, non-threatening and non-churchy as far as people's pre-conceptions are concerned.
- Grow organically.

Beyond that, we will only discover what a Missional Community looks like by starting one. This is our suggested starting point:

- Build community around sharing a simple breaking-bread meal followed by optional small-group activities (see later).
- Use a minimal liturgical structure sufficient to make it clear what the meal represents to believers.
- Encourage all to take part in short small-group discussion of a short passage of scripture before the meal.
- Avoid unnecessary religious elements, such as singing and preaching and pretence.

What it Might Become

You can have many different small missional communities in a community, each serving different demographic needs. They might meet once or twice a month – or more often - (not necessarily on a Sunday) in homes or public places.

There would be a mix of Christian and not yet Christian people. During the breaking-bread meal people would be sharing their news and also their concerns and needs. After the meal, several small groups could form to take things deeper. Possible small groups might include:

- A Parenting Course

- A Growth Group
- Prayer for healing or some other specific need.
- Help with budgeting or managing debt.
- Questions about the Bible or Christianity that people are struggling with.
- Practical help or advice.
- Learning and singing worship songs
- Agnostics / Atheists discussion group

What about our Existing Congregations?

If Missional Communities prove to be effective then we must give them priority over "normal church" and they must become our new "normal". We will probably want to find ways of gathering missional communities together from time to time, as Jesus leads – but not to build up our own kingdom.

The Kingdom of God in Community

Missional communities reject the producer / consumer view of church and embrace the call to live as a family joined in Christ. This family is where the Kingdom is expressed most clearly as family support is offered and relationship issues worked out rather than being ignored. The success of a Missional Community depends upon strong and transparent loving relationships. The real focus is on the relationships rather than the gatherings; gatherings support relationship, not the other way round. But Missional Communities are not inward-focussed; their community extends to their non-Christian friends and seeks to include them. Indeed, for some Christians in the community, their deepest and most transparent relationships might be with non-Christians.

Because of the central importance of relationships, the maximum size of a Missional Community is typically around 40 people.

So what does "church" look like?

Church is a Kingdom-centred way of life, not a meeting. It is a body functioning with Jesus as the head. It's leadership and direction depends upon listening to and hearing Jesus, not following our program. It is loving and supporting and disciple-making. It is salt and light in its wider community. It is God's Kingdom evident on earth. It's a place where Jesus would go un-noticed because there are so many doing what Jesus does; a place where Jesus would want to be as a participant.