

## What is Church?

So you want to start a new congregation. Have you thought about what you actually are starting? When anyone says “church,” what picture comes to your mind?

Most people have a picture in mind. That picture may be their experience of a “home church,” where they made a profession of faith and spent their growing up years. On other occasions, the picture is of the church that has had the greatest impact upon their spiritual life and development as a disciple. Some people’s image of church is one that is successful, often well-known through the media. Other people may not have a clear image of church — they simply know what church should not be like. So the picture of what church is can be dramatically different from person to person.

So what is church? Some Bible passages give us basic insights into the life and workings of the early church. However, a basic reading of the Acts and epistles communicates a wide variety of expressions and experiences. The Jerusalem church seemed to have had difficulty with issues related to including the Gentiles. But the Antioch church desired to reach out to everyone of every culture and tribe and tongue. So there is not even a single answer to this question to be found in the Bible that will satisfy everyone.

So what is church...to you? What is it that you want to start? Do you want to replicate your experience of the church that greatly impacted your spiritual life? As admirable as that may be, it probably will not be recreated. The church that impacted your spiritual life is a wonderful combination of leaders and members who have impacted that faith community throughout its history. It is the result of dreams and culture and values and desires and work of all the people who have been part of its existence. As wonderful as that experience was, it can never be recreated.

So what is church...to you? Perhaps you have moved on in your spiritual journey to the point where past ways and experiences no longer seem effective or desirable. You want to be part of something new that you feel God is doing. If it is a genuine break from the past, you need to be clear about how this “new thing” is a valid expression of church. This may seem clear in your mind, but it will need to have a very sharp focus and understandable image that can be communicated, understood and “owned” by those you seek to reach.

Here are some of the various “modes” of church life today. Without attempting to identify them all, we list these to help you clarify your picture of church:

- Chaplaincy: This body of believers gathers for worship and mutual benefit. Pastoral leaders are expected to “care for” members and members serve the structures, while the structures are designed to maintain an institution.
- Heritage: This body of believers gathers to maintain a particular heritage (such as a building, set of principles and beliefs, or cause). Pastoral leaders are usually spokespersons for the heritage, while members and pastors serve to promote or maintain the institution and its heritage.

- Traditional: While both Chaplaincy and Heritage modes are traditional expressions, there is another way of understanding the traditional mode of church life. Bodies of believers gather around an experience and expression of one “stream” of church faith practice that has existed since the Reformation. Various streams (as identified by Richard Foster in his book *Streams of Living Water*) include: contemplative, holiness, charismatic, evangelical, incarnational and social justice. Whatever “stream” they focus on shapes their proclamation and worship, their spirituality and discipleship, as well as their mission and ministry. Their church focus is shaped either by the pastor or by the programs used.
- Attractional: This body of believers desires to gather as many people as possible together into the internal life and functioning of the congregation. Any outside activities are for the sole purpose of drawing people into the congregation. The pastor provides leadership and oversight of the various program and structural components in order to attract and involve as many people as possible.
- Missional: This body of believers primarily directs its ministry focus outward toward the context in which it is located and the broader world beyond. Its purpose is for individuals and teams to join in God’s missionary actions wherever they discern God’s Spirit is at work.

Though not a complete list of modes, in listing these few, you already can see some of the issues involved. Your definition of church needs to address issues found in all of these modes: purpose, internal functioning, outward functioning, leadership roles, community identity and relationships and sense of belonging, as well as other issues. Above all, no one model is effective in ministering God’s love in all places and no one set of programs will powerfully impact the lives of people you desire to reach if they do not align with the culture and relate to the community.

At this point, you need to be clear. When you start a new congregation, what is church... to you...that will relate to the people you are called to reach?