



# 1. DNA OF THE EARLY CHURCHES

Session 1: What is the Church? (Acts 1:1-11)

Session 2: Who are the disciples? (Acts 1:12-26)

Session 3: Who is the Holy Spirit? (Acts 2:1-21)

Session 4: Fellowship of the believers. (Acts 2:22-47)

## Acknowledgement of Country

This land is God's land and God's Spirit dwells here. We acknowledge the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, traditional custodians of this land under God. We commit ourselves again to working for reconciliation in this land.

## Opening Prayer

## Getting Started

- What will happen to the future church?
- What are the other names of the church people often use? Which one do you like most?

## What is the church?

Many people today understand the church as a building as in Matthew 16:18, Jesus said "I will build my church..." However the word 'church' comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* which is defined as 'an assembly' or 'called-out ones.' The root meaning of 'church' is not that of a building, but of people.

Ephesians 1:22-23 says, "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

God also calls people into his church, as John 6:44 tells us, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father..." and Acts 2:47 describes, "...And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

If church is people what does it say about church's decline?

## Bible Reading: Acts 2:38-47

38 Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." 40 And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41 So those who welcomed his

message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (NRSV)



## Questions:

What are the characteristics of the early churches? Try to describe them using one or two adjectives? (i.e. 'Waiting Community')

What could be some characteristics of the 'Christendom' churches?

## Church after Christendom

The term 'Christendom' simply means the Christian world, but in its historical sense, the term also refers to the medieval and early modern period, during which the Christian world represented a geopolitical power juxtaposed with both paganism and especially the military threat of the Muslim world. (Wikipedia) Stuart Murray, who wrote the book *Church after Christendom*, in 2006 proposed that there was a pre-Christendom world prior to the 4th Century, an Age of Christendom that extended to the 18th Century. The church originally asked seekers to believe before they could belong; once they belonged, they were expected to behave according to what they believed. With the rise of national churches, first in the Roman Empire and then in each political nation during the Reformation, belief was imposed on people as the price of citizenship. They belonged before they believed. Furthermore, we are now living in a post-modern era where the institutional church no longer dominates as it did in Christendom.

## Living in the Post-modern world

Historians call the century between the English Revolution in 1688 and the French Revolution in 1789 'the Enlightenment.' (Avril Hannah-Jones *Christianity in the 21st Century* 2014)

From this era, philosophers believed that reason and criticism were a better way of reaching the truth than authority, the church, the king or even the Bible. From this rising of Reason, the 'modern' world has emerged. This Enlightenment also influenced Christianity in ways that we can see are both good and bad. The beginning of the printing technology meant people were able to read the Scriptures in their own language which accelerated the process of Reformation. It also triggered the growth of new Atheism like that of Prof. Richard Dawkins.

This rising of criticism also generated a growing popularity of 'Fundamentalism' in the 21st Century "which values the inerrancy of scripture, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection and Christ's divinity." (Avril Hannah-Jones)

Even though we are living in the modern world, many find there is an emerging culture of post-modernism which rejects Enlightenment's claims of the unquestionable power of reason, science and human progress. Post-modernism sees multiple 'truths' rather than a single 'truth,' deserting excessive conformity and conservatism of the modern movement. In this post-modern world we find people are happy to proclaim themselves 'spiritual' rather than 'religious'. As Sheila Larson says in *Habits of the Heart, 1985*, "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice..."

**Question:** What could be different or similar characteristics between Pre-Christendom (early churches) and Post Christendom?

### Post-Christendom *ekklesia*

"The church must change its tune for a world that needs our lyric but has stopped listening to our music." (William H. Gross)

To what tunes are this world likely to listen and respond? How can the church proclaim the good news when people are not interested in God's salvation?

Stuart Murray wrote in his book, *Church After Christendom*, that leavers might rejoin some kind

of church:

- where God is at the centre,
- that nurtures authentic friendships,
- that is self-critical and working towards healthy community practices,
- that treats adults as adults and encourages spiritual development,
- that fosters dialogue, etc.

An example where people have re-joined the church is the Alpha course in England which started at Holy Trinity Anglican church at Brompton in 1977. With the leadership of Nicky Gumbel from 1990, it dramatically expanded offering 33,500 courses in 163 countries in 2008. The Alpha course offered people the opportunity for friendship, sharing food, dialogue and Spiritual experience through its weekend programs.

Since 2004, the Fresh Expression movement has emerged in England, led by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York along with the Methodist Council. By 2014 it had grown to include more than 20,000 people involved in 518 fresh expression groups outside the church. Many other groups, like purpose-driven church, cell church, cafe-style church, cyber church, mid-week church and Pub church have emerged to accommodate people's spiritual needs.

No matter what the form of *ekklesia* (gathering), people have started to focus on the Mission of God (*Missio Dei*) rather than institutional maintenance.

**Questions:** Have a look at some possible characteristics of the early church and what do you think is the most important and why?

- Waiting, united, faithful, reframing, fearful, expectant, promised community; Praying, convinced, committed, inspired, devoted community (or disciple); Saved, spirited, growing, empowered, talented, multicultural, sharing, excited community.

Which characteristics can we find in our community?

### Question Time

### Closing prayer

Prepared by Rev Hoon You

"The body of Christ."  
This banner was made of many fabrics from around the world symbolizing multi-cultural people in the Body of Christ, made by Monash UCA Banner group in 2013

