

Sharing together

Share in small groups the story of your own involvement with your church.

- What were your first impressions?
- What have you found helpful?
- What has surprised you?
- Have you found anything unhelpful?
- What would you say to the person who says, "You don't have to go to church to be a Christian"?

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 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, 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.

Acts 2.44-47

How important is it to belong to the church?

You cannot be a Christian on your own. To be a Christian means to have a special relationship with God and with other people. That relationship must be living and growing. So you need to be part of the church if you are to grow as a Christian.

Read Luke's description of the early church in Acts.

- What would be attractive to you about belonging to such a group?
- In what ways is your church like the one described here?

Pictures of the Church

The early church had no church buildings. The church for them was a collection of people, not a place of worship. You did not just 'go' to church. You belonged to the church and you were the church.

The early Christians developed different images to describe this new community in relationship.

The church in relation with God

The Greek word for Church means ‘those who are called out’. The church consists of those who are called out by God into a new community. The Bible uses the picture of the church as the Bride of Christ, to emphasize God’s great love for the church (Ephesians 5.25-32).

The church in relation to herself

Christians are called to love one another (John 15.12). Together we form the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12) – joined to one another like parts of a body and working together with our different gifts for the common good. The word ‘member’ originally meant ‘limb’.

The church in relation to the world

Christians are called together to be a light to the world (Matthew 5.14-15). In the power of the Spirit we are sent out to witness to God’s love in our actions and our words: not to withdraw by ourselves but, like salt, to be mixed in with the whole of human society.

The church in relation to time

Christians live in this world now as pilgrims traveling home (1 Peter 2.11). The journey is beset with danger and difficulty. We need God’s grace and we need each other. One day we will reach our heavenly home and God’s love will renew the earth.

In the Creed we say we believe in the ‘One, holy, catholic and apostolic Church’. The word ‘catholic’ means ‘universal’. The word ‘apostolic’ refers to a Church built on the foundations of the apostles of Jesus and ‘sent’ by God with a message of love to the world.

Our own church

Every Christian community has its own story. Share:

- the story of your church
- the priorities of your church
- the vision of your church

Belonging to the Church

There are four different ways in which we belong to the Church. Each one of them is important.

1 The universal church

The whole company of Christian believers all around the world and all through time.

We are part of that great fellowship of Christians. We are being watched and encouraged by a great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us (Hebrews 12.1). We have brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world today. Together we form one body.

2 The church federation

We are also members of a church federation. All orthodox (= faithful to the Bible) believe the same on the fundamentals of faith but differ on the interpretation of some things. The church federation gives the Christian a wider sense of belonging. It lays the ground rules of belief and practice, worship, ministry and authority.

3 **The congregation**

We need to be committed members of a local church. That is our Christian family. It is where we worship every week. It is where we learn, where we care, where we move on in ministry, where we give our support financially. Belonging means being there on Sundays, giving and receiving.

4 **The small group**

Even congregations can be very large and relationships superficial. The quality of Christian life described in Acts 2 can often best be realized in a small group. There are different ways to do this in different churches. The important thing is to have a place where people can carry on growing, sharing and giving in a personal way.

Joining the church

All Christians churches are united in recognizing baptism in water as central to becoming a member of the church.

Baptism is what the church calls a sacrament. The word 'sacrament' means a pledge. It is a promise from God.

In baptism God promises to forgive our sins. It is a sign of the complete washing and cleansing from sin that we receive when we accept Christ. It is a sign of our old self dying with Christ and a complete new beginning as we rise with him.

The Heidelberg Catechism (16th century), a confessional document of this church, describes a sacrament as a holy, visible, signs and seals that were instituted by God so that by their use He might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel.

The outward sign is something you see and experience physically. In baptism this is the washing with water. Just as water washes away the dirt from the body, so Christ wants to wash us from our sins. The sign of baptism points to this promises and guarantees it at the same time (baptism is also a seal). Whoever repents and turns to God receives forgiveness of sins and eternal life. As surely as water makes us wet so surely are we guaranteed that we receive forgiveness of our sins.

Different beliefs about baptism

In many churches, such as Roman Catholic, Lutheran, United, Presbyterian and Reformed children of church members are baptized as infants. Water is sprinkled on the forehead of the child. The parents make promises also about the Christian education of their children.

When the children have grown old enough to understand or when they come to the Christian faith as adults, they are received into adult membership of the church. In the Reformed churches this is done through profession of faith In a special service, the candidates publicly profess their faith and the congregation prays that God will strengthen them by his Holy Spirit.

In other churches, such as the Baptist churches, no one is baptized as an infant. People can only be baptized as adults upon full profession of an adult faith. Baptism often takes place by full immersion.

For reflection

Pray for your own church this week and think about what your own membership of the church means (and should mean) to you.