

What is the Church?

- In the New Testament the Greek word “ecclesia” is used to describe the group of early Christians – this word means “called out”, so Christians are people whom God had “called out” from the ordinary world.
- The New Testament describes the church by several other different images e.g. “people of God”, “body of Christ”, “bride of Christ”.
- The Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles in the New Testament tell us that there were several different types of churches from the very beginning, as different leaders emphasised different messages e.g. some churches emphasised structures and authority, whilst others were more charismatic and depended upon the unpredictable guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Despite all local differences, from the very beginning all churches held certain key beliefs in common: faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord; baptism; the celebration of the Lord’s Supper / Eucharist; an acceptance of the teaching of the apostles; a high regard for communal love and fellowship; an expectation of the coming of the Kingdom of God.
- Jesus proclaimed, and demonstrated in his life, the Kingdom of God. At his Second Coming the Kingdom of God will be inaugurated on earth in all its fullness. The church is Christ’s instrument in this “in-between time” – it is where the gospel (“good news”) of salvation is proclaimed, and where Jesus’ disciples draw together around the sacraments and the Word of God. The church should be looking outward, to proclaim the message of Christ to the world, as well as looking inward to support the community of believers.
- As the church spread throughout the Roman Empire it deliberately adapted itself to contemporary political and social structures, as well as Christianising local pagan customs (this is why many ancient Christian churches were built on older sites, and why festivals such as All Saints have pagan undertones).
- Throughout the medieval period in the West there was an assumption that everyone born in Europe should automatically be baptised into the Christian (Catholic) Church. The Reformation returned people to the belief that the church is a congregation of the faithful, called by God, and this is seen in denominations such as the Baptists and Free Churches where believers have chosen their church. The Church of England has always retained the medieval parish structure, and with it the understanding that all those within a given parish area are under the spiritual care of the Anglican priest. This is why anyone who does not belong to another church or faith can proclaim themselves to be “C of E” and expect to use their local church for weddings and funerals.
- In the twentieth century the growing number of churches and the disunity between them was seen as a great scandal. This had been exacerbated in the nineteenth century by the way in which the quarrels and arguments of the Western Churches were exported to the mission fields in Africa and Asia. This led in 1948 to the formation of the World Council of Churches which encourages dialogue between different churches, and, where possible, the union of churches (e.g. as with the Church of South India). This is also known as the ecumenical movement from the Greek word “oikoumene” meaning “the inhabited world”.
- The word “church” is also used for the building in which Christians meet (although other names such as chapel or meeting hall are also used). It is often built to a symbolic plan, such as a cross or perhaps a circle. Many people think first of the church building when they use the word “church”, but this is not actually its primary usage.