

Small, Simple Gatherings are the Core of the Church

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What is the church?

The first mention of the word “church” in the Bible. **MATTHEW 16:18**

Ekklesia (gk) = “called-out-ones” or an assembled group of people. It refers strictly to a gathering of people and not a building or modern religious institution.

For the first 300 years of the early church, Christians did not have dedicated church buildings.

- The earliest identified Christian building is the Dura-Europos church in Syria, a private home modified around 233-256 AD to include a worship hall and baptistry.
- The first purpose-built church building is the Aqaba Church in Jordan. Built between 293 and 303 AD.
- In 313, Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity and married it to the government by making it the official state religion. This is where we see a massive boom in monumental church building across Rome.

The best metaphor used for the gathering of believers is the Family of God.

- Ephesians 2:18-19: we are members of God’s household.
- Romans 8:15-16: We are adopted into sonship and cry to God, “Abba, Father.”
- Galatians 3:26,28: We are Children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.
- 1 John 3:1: How great is the Father’s love for us in calling us children of God.
- Matthew 12:49-50: Jesus identifies those who do the will of His Father as His mother, brother, and sister.
- Galatians 6:10: calls us the “family of believers”
- 2 Corinthians 6:18: God promises to be the Father to believers as His sons and daughters.

How did the early church gather?

ACTS 2:42-47 - The first gatherings.

Temple (Large Gathering)

Acts 2:46 - They met daily in the Temple and in their homes

Acts 3:1 - Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer.

Acts 5

- Vs. 12: Believers were meeting regularly at the temple in the area known as Solomon’s Colonnade (porch).
- Vs. 20: An angel tells the Apostles to “Go to the Temple and give the people this message of Life”
- Vs. 42: Every day, in the Temple, and from house to house, they continued to teach and preach this message: “Jesus is the Messiah”

Homes (Small Gathering)

Acts 2:46: daily met in homes, sharing meals with gladness and generosity.

Acts 5:42: "from house to house"

Acts 8:3: Saul persecuted the church by entering "house after house"

Acts 12:12: Peter is miraculously released from prison and goes to the house of Mary, mother of John Mark, where many were gathered for prayer.

Acts 16:14-15: Lydia opens her home to Paul and his companions.

Acts 18:7-8: Paul leaves the synagogue and begins meeting in the house of Titius Justus, next door.

Acts 20:20: Paul's ministry in Ephesus: "I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes."

Acts 20:7-12: Paul is teaching in the upper room of a home. Boy falls out of the window.

Romans 16:3-5, 1 Corinthians 16:19: Paul greets the church that meets in Priscilla and Aquila's home.

Colossians 4:15 - Paul greets Nympha and the church that meets in her home.

Philemon 1-2: Paul addresses: Philemon, our beloved co-worker... and the church that meets in your house."

EQUAL IMPORTANCE

There are roughly 7-10 verses in the New Testament that talk about the church gathering at the temple in a large group. And there are at least 11 that specifically speak to the church meeting in homes. This is super important. It is not an either/or. We need both.

What does each do well?

Large Gatherings

- Songs: Singing songs that worship and exalt Jesus.
- Scripture: Speak Scripture together aloud.
- Stories: Share testimonies of what God is doing in the lives of individual believers in the smaller gathering.
- Sermon: Leaders preach and teach the Word of God to edify the family of God and equip them for the work of ministry. It also ensures that we are all on the same page doctrinally and theologically. Basically, we believe and agree on the same Biblical truths.
- Serving & Support: We come together to serve our community and support ministry locally and around the world.

Small Community/Family

- Are the primary place of connection to the body of Christ.
- Provide a place for each of us to bring and practice our giftings from God.
- Provide a place to ask questions and go deeper into the sermon each week.
- Provide a place to share a meal and the Communion together, regularly.
- Provide pastoral care at a much more individual level. Groups are able to meet real needs in the lives of their members. They can bring big needs to the larger group.
- Allow us to truly do life together: We know each other, our kids, what we do for fun, the activities that we and our families are involved in, etc. We spend real quality time together.
- A place to bear one another's burdens in a real and meaningful way.

NOTE: IF YOU FEEL LIKE YOU AREN'T REALLY CONNECTING WITH ANYONE, IT MAY BE BECAUSE YOU ARE ONLY ATTENDING ON SUNDAYS AND/OR WEDNESDAYS. REAL CONNECTION DOESN'T HAPPEN IN A LARGER GATHERING...WE JUST DON'T HAVE THE TIME OR SPACE....IT CAN ONLY HAPPEN THROUGH LIVING LIFE TOGETHER.

Why is it vitally important that each of us is part of a small, simple gathering?

The 59 One Anothers

The New Testament lists 59 specific commands that involve “one-another” that really cannot be done in the context of a large gathering. They are expressed and fulfilled best in the smaller, simpler gathering of the

It is the place to participate and not just spectate.

1 CORINTHIANS 14:26

The expectation is that each believer...each of US!... has something unique that we need to bring to the table. If everyone shared on a Sunday morning, we would never get out of here!

The purpose of sharing your unique contribution is to strengthen, encourage, and build up the community of believers. If you don't participate, we are missing out on a vital part of our body.

Small gatherings allow a place for that to happen.

It is how people will be added to the Kingdom of God

ACTS 2:47, ACTS 5:14

They were added daily! That means a *MINIMUM* of 365 people a year were coming to know Christ.

It is the first place many people should be introduced to the church.

It is much easier for a non-believer to join you for a dinner at a friend's house than to walk into a large gathering where they don't know anyone and don't have a way to ask questions.

1 CORINTHIANS 14:23-25 - Paul shows that there is an expectation that unbelievers will visit your gatherings.

James 2: Warns against judging others who come into your meetings by how they are dressed. It is inferred that these are people you don't know.

The Return of our King Draws Near

HEBREWS 10:25 -

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to realize that we are quickly approaching the end of the age. Wars, rumor of war, plagues, the hearts of many growing cold to the Gospel, the great falling away from the faith. Add to that

the normal everyday cares, trials, hurts, disappointments, and heartbreaks - We are able to encourage each other and endure longer when we are together.

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

Final Thoughts

Think about:

<u>Large gatherings</u>	vs.	<u>Small Communities</u>
Temple		Homes
Celebration		Participation
What we do together		what we do for one another

The small, simple gatherings (in homes or other similar locations) outside of the Sunday gathering are vital to the health, maturity, and growth of our church.

Introduction of Connect Group Leaders

HAVE SOME YOUTH PASS OUT CONNECT GROUP PLACARDS.

Here at The Refuge, we believe that small, simple gatherings are the essential expression of the Church of Jesus Christ. We call these groups....Connect Groups.

Give a brief description of how the Connect Groups kept our church alive during the COVID-19 pandemic. But as leadership, we also see that Connect Groups are the Church. It is where true life transformation occurs as we do life together.

Many of these leaders have led groups for many years; some are new leaders. But all of them are dedicated to shepherding the people that God places into their care. Each of these leaders and couples has shown themselves to live by the examples and qualifications that we find in Scripture for church leaders and shepherds.

INTRODUCE THE LEADERS AND WHEN/WHERE THEY MEET.

After we dismiss today, I want to encourage you to meet with our Connect Group leaders and find a group to join.

1. Which group is closest to where you live?
 - a. We are dedicated to covering the community with Connect Groups as they multiply and expand.
 - b. Groups that live in proximity to one another are more likely to dive deep into each other's lives because they will see each other more often than other groups.
2. Does another time work better?
 - a. If the day/time/place doesn't work, is there another group that would?
 - b. Make a commitment to not let an excuse make you miss out on genuine community, friendship, love, care, and support.