



## What is the Church?

### We are the church!

We often talk about 'the church', but what do we mean when we say the word? We all know that we do not mean the church building, even when we mostly point towards a building when people ask us where the church is. We know that the church consists of people. But, then we also think that 'the church' must be the important people or meetings of the church, because when people ask 'what does the church say?' they refer to the statements and pronouncements of these important people or meetings.

No, we cannot emphasise it strongly enough that all of us together – all of the faithful – form the church!

### We are the church of the Triune God

It is *this* church we confess to believe in, when we repeat the Apostle's Creed on Sundays: 'I believe in the holy catholic Christian church (that is, the one, true Christian church of all times and all places), the communion of saints.' The church is the body of Christ, God's people, the bride of Christ. There are many more images in the Bible for the church. The church is a collection of people whose identity lies in their being 'children of God the Father', through Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us a lot about the identity of the church: it is God's property, his children, his people. **God the Father** himself gathers, protects and builds his church. He sends them out as his

witnesses to the world. It is **Jesus Christ** who paid with his blood so that we could become part of his *one* body; he is the Lord who rules his church and who intercedes for us with the Father. And it is the **Holy Spirit** who helps us to believe, who makes us new, who binds us together, and who gives us the strength to be God's witnesses in the world.

### **Why are there so many churches?**

But now we are faced with quite a few problems. The first is the fact of so many 'churches'. It is a pity that we could not use a different word here, because it is confusing to have to use the one word church for more than one meaning. Yes, the *one* church of Christ has many faces, but we cannot limit the whole church to only one of these faces. Not one of them can be the only true church ... even if they sometimes claim to be so. They are 'organisations' (institutions), while the one, true church of Christ is an 'organism', a living creation.

Another seemingly problematic issue is that there are as many churches as there are languages and places. But it is only logical that the people of Cape Town cannot congregate with the people of Kakamas ... these places are just too far away from each other. The same is true for the faithful in Clifton and those in Blue Downs. It is therefore very positive that there are many local *congregations* (this is how we call the church in its local form), so that people can be within walking or commuting distance from where the services are held on Sundays. All these congregations are supposed to be only faces of the *one* church of Christ.

The church of Christ is especially visible on Sundays during the services. For all practical purposes, 'the church' is people worshipping together. People who worship and pray together must just always realise that they form part of a greater whole, namely the church of Christ. They are what they are, because Christ is their King. They have still many more brothers and sisters, even though they are not with them while they are congregating.

### **How do you become a member of a congregation?**

How do you become a member of the church of Christ? Through faith in Jesus Christ, through placing your trust in God. How do you become a member of a local congregation?

There is usually an additional process involved. Without confessing your faith in terms of the church's creed, you cannot become a member of the church. Local congregations usually also have a number of rules to which you have to ascribe to, to assure orderliness. Of course, these rules cannot be in contradiction with the Bible, but on the other hand, the Bible does not prescribe everything. The rules are a way of giving you the necessary information to connect nicely with fellow believers and form part of the local congregation.

Generally, churches want to make people feel welcome and become part of their family. If we do not want to engage with our fellow believers, we cannot really blame the congregation for not feeling at home. If we stay outside, we are going to miss so much and be poorer in so many respects!

## What does the church do?

Many things happen in the local church. We have already said that *worship* happens here. Yes, especially on Sundays, this group of people, the congregation, comes together to worship the Lord through song and prayer, and to find out what God wants from them as they listen to the scripture reading and the preaching.

But what members of a church do *outside* the church building, on *other days* than Sunday, is even more important. The church does not only function inside the church building. We – the faithful – represent the church (and the God of the church) at work, in meetings, at school, on the sports fields, or when we visit friends or family. There it becomes clear if we are *really* followers of the Lord Jesus.

And this is the other reason why we congregate on Sundays (and, if possible, also during the week): to practice, to be instructed and to learn what it means to be Christians, to be worthy representatives of Christ. At church, we help each other to be what Christ wants us to be. This process of building of faith is very important.

## Who does the work?

But who is responsible for this? It is clear that

the church has a lot of work and a lot of responsibility to shoulder in this world, but who must take it on themselves to do this? The preachers or pastors? No, all of us, together. Because *we* are the church. Yes, the church has leaders and people who are chosen and set apart for some tasks, but the pastors' task is actually to instruct and prepare us so that *we* would be able to do *our* task. Paul expresses it so clearly in Ephesians 4:12 where he emphasises that the purpose of the 'gifts' (to some leaders and to some offices) was 'to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up'. All the work that is done in Christ's name in this world is done by his *body* (the church) and this body (that is *us*) must be prepared in order to be able to serve.

It is thus very clear that we must get rid of the idea that everything is centered around the pastors. We have become used to saying that the pastor is the person with the 'calling to serve'. This is the person who can and should do everything. But the pastor *cannot* do everything that the whole body alone can carry out, because this person is only a member or part of the whole. Pastors do not have all the gifts that are necessary to fulfil the task of the church on their own, because the gifts are given to the whole body. Pastors *may* not do everything, because their responsibility is only to build up the whole body - and every part of the body - for its unique task. They cannot and they may not do everything.

The pastor or rector, the elders and the deacons are indeed important, but they are not the church on their own ... we are all, together, the church. The task of the church is also not limited to what goes on inside the congregation or to what is done for members of the congregation. It is especially what is done outside, in the

world. And this task can only be done by us, simple believers, because it is us who represent the Lord everywhere and in every situation. Acts 1 tells us that the final words of Jesus to his disciples were to remind them that they were his *witnesses* or representatives. We are all called to this task.

**Questions:**

Is the church an organisation?

What is the task of church officials?

Is the church one, or many?

What is the work of the church?

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