

## What Is the "Local Church?"

In this discussion exercise, ask the students to describe the scope or area encompassed by each of the following references. The point is that in each reference, the word "church" is in the singular. Since the scope of what is meant by each reference is different, we can draw conclusions about what constitutes a local church.

### Discussion exercise:

For each of the following verses, answer the question: "What geographical area is being described?"

1. Col. 1:18
2. Acts 9:31
3. 1 Cor. 1:2
4. Rom. 16:5,10,11,14

### Answers:

1. Col. 1:18 the church throughout the world
2. Acts 9:31 the church throughout a region
3. 1 Cor. 1:2 the church in a city (compare 14:34)
4. Rom. 16:5,10,11,14 several house churches within one city

**Question:** What are some implications can we draw from these four passages concerning what size or structure a group must have to be considered a local church?

Answers: The word "church" is not a technical designation of a local group of any particular size or structure. Instead, it apparently described any extent of locality under discussion. Therefore, in answer to the question, "What constitutes a local church?" the scriptural answer is that any part of the universal church which is somehow local can be said to be a local church. We would suggest this holds even down to the level where ". . . two or three have gathered together in my name. . . ." (Mt. 18:20) This seems to be Christ's version of what is necessary to have a local church.

A church of two or three may not be a very good church in that it is not able to fulfill all of the functions that are appropriate for a local church according to the New Testament, but this does not mean that it is not a church. A distinction must be made between that which determines the "being" of the church versus the "well-being" of the church.

The local church in the New Testament.

While the definition of the local church is based upon our understanding of the universal church, the imperative passages about church life usually refer to the local church (i.e., Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12,14; Eph. 4). The significance of this is that if we try to apply principles like the inter-working of the members of the body as taught in 1 Cor. 12 to the universal church, we move away from the intention of the author to focus on the interaction of members on each other in Christian community.

Likewise, no structure or polity is given for the universal church except the unifying influence of the apostles who planted the local churches. There is also an example of a council of leaders from more than

one local church meeting to resolve differences in Acts 15. We cannot say what the biblical pattern of extra-local church government was, since it is not given.

### **Optional discussion**

It is customary in many theologies to construct a restrictive definition of what constitutes a local church. Sometimes several conditions, such as the proper observation of the sacraments, the presence of duly established clergy, a formal government, and ministry to all ages are given before a group can be called a church. What might be the motive for constructing such added conditions?