



Story of Faith Community

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Grace in Action

PRE-LESSON INFORMATION

SESSION DESCRIPTION

The story of the early church tells of a faith community that shared everything in common—not only worship, but food, work, and all of life. How can the historical church—*ekklesia*—translate to who we are called to be as church today? Stories of Jesus and the early “church” show us how we can be a true community of faith, across racial, socioeconomic and other boundaries that so frequently divide us. Engage in interactive conversation and activities that explore what it means to be a faith community today.

Leading question: What is the role of the church in God's story today?

ELCA FAITH PRACTICES

Invite

LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of this session, participants will be able to:

- Have honest conversation that allows them to thoughtfully consider if our current way of being church is or is not fulfilling our Gospel calling.
- Have a clear understanding of how the historical church or *ekklesia* community functioned.
- Create a clear vision of what a faith community based on the historical *ekklesia* could be and be given clear tools to enact these visions in their own context.

BIBLICAL FOCUS

- Acts 2:43-47 – The earliest Christians

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Computer, projector, and screen for PowerPoint that accompanies this session
- Ability to access and project video/sound that accompanies this session (if utilized). It is highly recommended that you download online videos prior to the presentation.
- Pens
- Paper
- Giant butcher paper
- Markers (one pack for each group of 5-7 people)
- Large bowl
- Sand
- Candles for each participant
- Lighter

LESSON PLAN

OPENING ACTIVITY

Watch Video Interview #1 featuring people who don't consider themselves Christians, asked the question, "Why does church matter?"

After the video, ask participants to reflect on the following questions:

- What feelings or reactions came up for you when you saw this?
- What pieces could you relate to? What parts made you feel nervous?
- Would these people be welcome in your church as it is?
- Do you think they would feel a sense of connection to God in your church as it is?
- Do the people in the video inspire you to change in your own church context? If so, how?

CONTEXTUAL BIBLE STUDY: THE MEANING of *EKKLESIA*

Read Acts 2:43-47:

43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 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, 47 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.

Play Video: *Ekklesia*—Stories from the Early Church

This segment utilizes the video that accompanies the session. A script with the video's content is provided in the appendix for leader use in preparing the lesson and for those who do not have access to or do not wish to utilize the video during the session.

After the video, read Acts 2:43-47 again.

Questions for reflection:

- After hearing this reading what words or phrases come to your mind?
- What does this text and the early church understanding of the *ekklesia* have to say about who has access to resources and political power and who does not?
- How do you think this historical version of the church in the beginning compares with what church is today? What's the same? What's different?

VISION of WHAT CHURCH COULD BE

Supplies needed for the *Better Than Legos: Build It Yourself Faith Community* activity:

- Pens
- Paper
- Giant butcher paper
- Markers (one pack for each group)

Gather into groups of 5-7 people. Have each group sit in a circle around a large piece of the giant butcher paper. Leave a pack of markers on each sheet of butcher paper. Then give the following instructions:

“Based on our examination of *ekklesia* (the early church), create your own idea of what faith community could look like today. Be creative in using the markers and butcher paper in front of you.” Give the group 15 minutes to complete the task.

After 15 minutes, call the group back together and have each group take a minute to share about the faith community they created. Consider:

- What makes you excited about it?
- What do you like best about it?
- What are the opportunities that this type of faith community create?

Now “the real world” questions come in. Within the large group, ask participants:

- What are the barriers to creating this type of community?
- How might funding become an issue?
- How might politics become an issue? Governmental policies/regulations?

After some honest discussion about challenges, give the group 5 more minutes to modify their plan with the following question:

- What are ways you could address issues that impede this type of faith community?

Call the group back together and use the following questions to debrief the activity:

- What was important to you about the faith community that you built?
- How was it the same or different from the faith communities in which you’ve already been a part of?
- What would it take to create this type of community within your own faith community?
- What are some concrete things you could do to make this happen?

THE *EKKLESIA* TODAY

See Appendix A “Real Life Examples that Activate *Ekklesia* in U.S. Faith Communities.”

The Gospel calls us to build faith communities that involve people outside of the four walls of our churches. As with the early *ekklesia*, these faith communities must care as much about the economics and politics of their communities as they do about spiritual life and care.

Ideas for how to apply the concept of *ekklesia* to the faith community that you are a part of:

- One to one conversations/interviews are a great tool to engage people outside the walls of your church. Set up meetings with people in your neighborhood or city. (See 1-1 Training, <http://www.piconetwork.org/tools-resources/0002>)
- Exploring peoples’ own interests and creating projects based on what people care about and not only around what you and/or your congregation care about. (See Appendix B: 5 Steps to Get to Know Your Neighborhood)
- Create a culture of ongoing relationships and accountability through practice of one to ones within your congregation

MEANINGFUL FAITH COMMUNITY

Watch Video Interview #2 with the same people from the first video, but this time being asked the question, “Where have you found 'faith community' that has been meaningful for you?”

Reflection questions:

- After seeing both videos, have any of your assumptions about church been challenged or changed?
- Where do you find yourself authentically involved in faith community inside OR outside of your church?

CLOSING ACTIVITY: MY COMMITMENT to BUILDING the *EKKLESIA*

Supplies needed for this activity:

- Large bowl
- Sand
- Candles for each participant
- Lighter

Have participants sit in a circle. In the middle of the circle, place the bowl full of sand in the middle of the circle, on the ground or on a small table. Place the unlit candles in the bowl so that they are standing up the in sand.

Invite each participant to think of one thing they might commit to, to build the *ekklesia* (the church as a movement of freedom and liberation). As each participant feels moved they can come forward to light a candle and announce their commitments to one another.

Optional addition: At the beginning and end of the exercise, sing the refrain of a meditative song that reinforces the message of the lesson; you can also sing this refrain immediately after each participant comes forward. (Example: Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying, *ELW* #752/*WOV* #775.)

CLOSING the CONVERSATION

Thank the group for their participation and make any final remarks or announcements. End with a closing prayer.



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SUGGESTED RESOURCES

The following are suggested as resources for further exploration of this session's topic.

One-to-One Training: <http://www.piconetwork.org/tools-resources/0002>

Horsley, Richard. *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Borg, Marcus J. and John Dominic Crossan. *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth*. HarperOne, 2009.

Pickett, Raymond. *The Cross in Corinth: The Social Significance of the Death of Jesus*. Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1997.

Pickett, Raymond. "You Cannot Serve God and Mammon': Economic Relations and Human Flourishing in Luke." *Dialog*, volume 52, issue 1 (March 2013).

These website links introduce churches intentionally engaging with their communities:

- Grace in Action Church, Detroit, Mich. www.graceinactiondetroit.org
- Shekinah Chapel ELCA, Riverdale, Ill. www.shekinahchapel.org
- Leaven Community ELCA, Portland, Ore. www.leavencommunity.org

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Meghan Sobocienski is Director of Grace in Action Collectives in Detroit, an organization consisting of two youth collectives and a cooperative business incubator, and the Project Coordinator for the Organizing for Mission Cohort, a collective of ELCA mission congregations doing organizing in their local contexts. She is a Diaconal Minister in the ELCA with eight years of community organizing experience in Northern California and Detroit.

Elizabeth Flores is Project Manager for Radical Productions and a leader and board member of Grace in Action Church in Detroit. She is a junior at Cesar Chavez Academy in Southwest Detroit and aspires to attend the University of Michigan and one day become a computer programmer or social worker. She sees church as a family, a place where people support each other and work together for the betterment of the whole community.

John Cummings is Pastor and Mission Developer for Grace in Action Church, a bilingual English/Spanish ministry in southwest Detroit. He is passionate about creating community around faith acted out in the contexts where we live, and understanding the church as an instrument to create social change in our world today.

Video Script – Stories of Faith Community

The following script is, generally speaking, the content contained in the video segment of this lesson, provided as information for those who cannot access or do not wish to utilize the video.

Today we are going to talk a little more about what it means to be “church.” When we hear the word church, what are some other words that come immediately to mind? (possible examples: a steeple, a building, a community, the ELCA, worship, Sunday, the people of God)

Let me share with you the story of the early church and talk about what church meant for people then. The word “church” that we use today is actually a fairly mediocre, if not lousy, translation of the original Greek word that is used in the Bible for church, which is the word *ekklesia*. If you look up *ekklesia* in a Greek dictionary, you will find a few different definitions: “those called out,” “those called together,” or “the assembly” are the most prominent. But the meaning of *ekklesia* is much deeper than these definitions, and goes all the way back to ancient Greece, the world's first democracy. In Greece, the *ekklesia* was the democratic assembly of citizens, ordinary people who came together on a regular basis to make political decisions about the town or city where they lived. They voted in new politicians; they debated policies; they listened to and decided on appeals. It is the first instance in human history that we know of where ordinary citizens had power over political decisions, large and small, that affected themselves.

Fast forward a few hundred years to the Roman Empire during Jesus' time. After Greece fell under Roman rule, the powers of the *ekklesia* were greatly diminished, and the *ekklesia* itself became nothing more than a few small judicial committees. Real decision making power was put in the hands of Roman authorities and a few wealthy citizens.

Enter Jesus of Nazareth! Jesus was a Jewish man who came preaching about “the kingdom of God.” For us, the word “kingdom” sounds like an old phrase about castles and knights. But in Jesus time, it would have been the equivalent of saying that the “government of God” or the “nation of God” was going to come on Earth. Any mention of a kingdom besides the Roman Empire would have suggested a takeover, or an overthrowing of Roman powers. To prepare for the coming of his kingdom, Jesus established his own democratic assembly, or *ekklesia*, among the people of Israel, the Jewish people living under Roman oppression. The Jesus *ekklesia* was different from Roman decision making groups, because it included ordinary citizens, men and women, slaves and free people. We get our best description about what this early *ekklesia* looked like from the passage in Acts that we just read. It consisted of small groups of devout Jewish people who gathered together in homes over food. Within these small communities, the people of Jesus' “assembly” practiced the values and principles of the “kingdom of God” - that is, they shared their goods and resources in common, so that none were in need, and every person had enough. They even sent money to other gatherings of the *ekklesia* who were in great need.

The gatherings of the *ekklesia* did not see themselves as an end unto themselves: instead, they saw themselves as forerunner to the future reign of God. In the gospels, the texts that served as the foundational documents of the *ekklesia* and we now read in the bible, Jesus ascends to heaven and tells his disciples that he will return. The members of the *ekklesia* believed that, when Jesus came back, he would eliminate the current established order of the Roman Empire and the corrupt religious elites, and create a new world order based on the principles and values of justice and mutual support that they were practicing in their small home-based groups. When God's kingdom arrived with Jesus' return, their communities would serve as beachheads to spread this new world order throughout the towns and cities where they were located.

In short, the early *ekklesia* was in actuality a religious movement with overt social and political motives, that intended to replace the oppressive and unjust order of the Roman Empire with an order based on Jesus' teachings and God's covenant with the Jewish people: one in which justice, humanity, and love of one's neighbor were at the very center of all decisions and the structure of society.

Appendix A

Real Life Examples That Activate *Ekklesia* in U.S. Faith Communities

Grace in Action Church, Detroit, Mich. www.graceinactiondetroit.org

- See “Collectives” to learn about Detroit youth who are becoming young entrepreneurs and shifting the economic narrative of their city

Shekinah Chapel ELCA, Riverdale, Ill. www.shekinahchapel.org

- See “Our History” to learn about how a mentoring and formation experience for young African American men grew into a thriving church.

Leaven Community ELCA, Portland, Ore. www.leavencommunity.org

- See “Koinonia Community Garden” to learn about how the creation of a garden built community in a Portland neighborhood, and brought people into a deeper sense of spiritual connection with the earth and each other.

Appendix B

5 Steps to Get to Know Your Neighborhood

- 1** Engage in 1-1 Conversations with people in your congregation and people in the larger community.
(See <http://www.piconetwork.org/tools-resources/0002>)
- 2** Take walks in your neighborhood, and say hello to people you see.
- 3** Spend time in neighborhood gathering places such as cafes, restaurants, or community centers, and talk to people there about how they feel about the neighborhood: “What do you like best about living here?”, “What’s hard about living here?”
- 4** Introduce yourself to the owners of local businesses, school principals and teachers, or non-profit leaders. Example: “Hi, my name is _____, and I am a member of _____ church. I wanted to introduce myself to you so we could get to know you and your business/school/organization better, and see if there are ways we can work together to make this neighborhood a better place to live and work for all of us.”
- 5** Once you feel you have a sense of the major issue(s) facing your neighborhood, gather people together to talk about how you all can address that issue. Example: there is a lot of traffic, and crosswalks. Get a group of people who is concerned about traffic safety together, and create a plan for how to get more crosswalks.