

“DNA of the Early Churches”

Week 1: What is the church? (Acts 1:1-11)

Four sessions in Advent:

Week 1: What is the church? (Acts 1:1-11)

Week 2: Who are the disciples? (Acts 1:12-26)

Week 3: Who is the Holy Spirit? (Acts 2:1-21)

Week 4: Fellowship of the believers (Acts 2:22-47)

Prayer

O Creator of all, Be Thou our Vision,
 For Port Melbourne Uniting Church
 For the Uniting Church in Australia
 For each of the churches around the world.

O Christ, Be Thou our Vision throughout the world...
 We pray for Your guidance and Your strength.
 Help us to be instruments of Your justice and Your peace.

O Holy Spirit, Inspire us to re-form and deepen our fellowship. Through Your Amazing Grace,
 Help us to see what we need to see...
 Help us to be who You call us to be...

Ground us as a church in the depths of Your Love.
 Through our very breathing help us to become Your Prayer. Awaken us to Your Divine Indwelling where you promise,
 “I shall live in them and I shall walk the corridors of their heart.”

Let this *Advent* be a time of...
 waiting, learning and transformation. **Amen!**
 (Adopted from 2008 General Conference of the United Methodist Church)

Getting Started

Consider these questions and spend a few minutes discussing them.

1. Advent(which means *coming*) is a season of waiting. What are you waiting to see happening in the future church?
2. What other names of the church do people often use? Which one do you like most?

God’s church in crisis?

Data from the 2013 census of the Uniting Church in Australia reveals 2078 church locations across Australia, a decrease of 31% since

1990, and a weekly worship attendance of 97,200(including 12,500 children), a decline of 40%. While 68 % of Uniting Churches experienced strong community building through running small groups in the last 12 month, 25% of Uniting Churches do not have children in the congregation. (*Journey* June 2014. p.12-13)
 Discuss briefly what may have contributed to such a decline?



What is the church?

Many people today understand the church as a building as in Matthew 16:18, Jesus said “I will build my church...” However the word ‘church’ comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* which is defined as ‘an assembly’ or ‘called-out ones.’ The root meaning of ‘church’ is not that of a building, but of people.

Ephesians 1:22-23 says, “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

God also calls people into his church, as John 6:44 tells us, “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father...” and Acts 2:47 describes, “...And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”
 If church is people what does it say about church’s decline?



Messages from Acts 1:1-11

1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. 10 While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. 11 They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (NRSV)

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Read the passage together then discuss following questions:

1. Acts is the second volume of a two-volume work. In what ways are the books of Luke

and Acts similar? In what ways are they different?

2. What does Jesus want the disciples to do, and why?
3. How was the 'kingdom of Israel'(v.6) disciples were waiting to be restored different to Jesus' 'kingdom of God'? (v.3)
4. What were the characteristics of the early churches? Try to describe them using one or two adjectives? (e.g. 'waiting community')

Closing prayer

God our creator, you are maker of heaven and earth
 Be our freedom, Lord!
 God our Redeemer, in Christ you have come to us
 Be our freedom, Lord!
 God our Sustainer, you comfort and disturb
 Be our freedom, Lord!
 God, one God, beyond understanding, made known in Jesus, present in our midst
 Be our freedom, Lord!
 Enlighten our lives with your word, that in it
 We may find our way and our hope
 Be our freedom, Lord!

Amen.

From Be Our Freedom Lord, Terry Falla 1994



"The body of Christ." This banner was made from many fabrics from around the world symbolizing multicultural people in the Body of Christ, made by Monash UCA Banner group in 2013



POINT TO PONDER

The root meaning of 'church' is not that of a building, but of people.

VERSE TO REMEMBER

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."(Acts 1:8, NRSV)

“DNA of the Early Churches”

Week 2: Who are the disciples? (Acts 1:12-26)

Four sessions in Advent:

Week 1: What is the church? (Acts 1:1-11)

Week 2: Who are the disciples? (Acts 1:12-26)

Week 3: Who is the Holy Spirit? (Acts 2:1-21)

Week 4: Fellowship of the believers (Acts 2:22-47)

Prayer

Lord God,
 In Jesus you came in the body:
 Flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone
 One with us in searing pain and delirious laughter.

We thank you that you did not remain an idea, Even a religious idea
 But walked, wept and washed feet among us.

By your love
 Change our ideas
 Especially our religious ideas
 Into living signs of your worth and will.

**Through our lives and by our prayers
 Your kingdom come. Amen.**

From Present on Earth - Worship Resources on the life of Jesus, Wild Goose Worship Glasgow, 2002

Getting Started

Sing “TIS 467 I am the church” together.

Consider these questions and spend a few minutes discussing them.

1. Try to recall what we learned about church last week and share what you remember about the follower’s characteristics in Acts ch.1.
2. When was the first time you prayed to God and were answered?

Church after Christendom

The term ‘Christendom’ simply means the Christian world, but in its historical sense, the term also refers to the medieval and early modern period, during which the Christian world represented a geopolitical power juxtaposed with both paganism and especially the military threat of the Muslim world. (*Wikipedia*)
 Stuart Murray, who wrote the book *Church after*

Christendom, in 2006 proposed that there was a pre-Christendom world prior to the 4th Century, an Age of Christendom that extended to the 18th Century. The church originally asked seekers to believe before they could belong; once they belonged, they were expected to behave according to what they believed. With the rise of national churches, first in the Roman Empire and then in each political nation during the Reformation, belief was imposed on people as the price of citizenship. They belonged before they believed. Furthermore, we are now living in a post-modern era where the institutional church no longer dominates as it did in Christendom.

Discuss briefly where have you seen evidence of this post-Christendom world in your experience? What could be some vestiges of the Christendom churches in a post-Christendom world and what does it mean to be a disciple in a post-Christendom world?



Messages from Acts 1:12-26

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. 13 When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14 All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers. 15 In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, 16 "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus— 17 for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." 18 (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. 19 This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20 "For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it'; and 'Let another take his position of overseer.' 21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." 23 So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24 Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen 25 to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." 26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles. (NRSV)



POINT TO PONDER

People in Christendom churches belonged before they believed.

VERSE TO REMEMBER

"beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection."
(Acts 1:22, NRSV)

DNA of the early churches

Read the passage together then discuss following questions:

1. What did it mean for disciples to return to Jerusalem?
2. What characteristics must Judas' replacement have? Why are they important?
3. See the following list of apostles' deaths. What can we say about the disciples of the early church?

Death of the twelve apostles:

1. Andrew-crucified
 2. Bartholomew - beaten then crucified
 3. James, son of Alphaeus-stoned to death
 4. James, son of Zebedee-beheaded
 5. John-exiled for his faith;died of old age
 6. Judas(not Iscariot)-stoned to death
 7. Matthew-speared to death
 8. Peter-crucified upside down
 9. Philip-crucified
 - 10.Simon-crucified
 - 11.Thomas-speared to death
 - 12.Matthias-stoned to death
- (source:John Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, 1563)

4. What can we add to characteristics of the early churches and disciples? Try to describe them using one or two adjectives. (e.g. 'waiting community')

Closing prayer

God of the impossible,
who creates life out of nothing,
who brings life out of death
and who offers abundant life to the living dead,
bring us forth from our tombs,
gush up from within us with the living water of your Spirit
and empower us with all joy and hope in believing
that we might be used as instruments of your peace,
mercy and justice.

Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

from *Finding Light in Darkness* 2014 by Alistair Macrae

“DNA of the Early Churches” 3

Week 3: Who is the Holy Spirit? (Acts 2:1-21)

Four sessions in Advent:

Week 1: What is the church? (Acts 1:1-11)

Week 2: Who are the disciples? (Acts 1:12-26)

Week 3: Who is the Holy Spirit? (Acts 2:1-21)

Week 4: Fellowship of the believers (Acts 2:22-47)

Prayer

The time has come to open our eyes.

The time has come:

The time has come!

The time has come to listen to God.

The time has come:

The time has come!

The time has come to change our hearts.

The time has come:

The time has come!

The time has come!

The time has come!

© Rev. Dr. Garry Deverell

Getting Started

Consider these questions and spend a few minutes discussing them.

1. Try to recall what we learned about disciples last week and share what you remember about the follower’s characteristics in Acts ch.1.
2. How can we overcome the fear of death?

Living in the Post-modern world

Historians call the century between the English Revolution in 1688 and the French Revolution in 1789 ‘the Enlightenment.’ (Avril Hannah-Jones *Christianity in the 21st Century* 2014)

From this era, philosophers believed that reason and criticism were a better way of reaching the truth than authority, the church, the king or even the Bible. From this rising of Reason, the ‘modern’ world has emerged. This Enlightenment also influenced Christianity in ways that we can see are both good and bad. The beginning of the printing technology meant people were able to read the Scriptures in their own language which accelerated the process of Reformation. It also triggered the growth of

new Atheism like that of Prof. Richard Dawkins.

This rising of criticism also generated a growing popularity of ‘Fundamentalism’ in the 21st Century “which values the inerrancy of scripture, virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection and Christ’s divinity.” (Avril Hannah-Jones) Even though we are living in the modern world, many find there is an emerging culture of post-modernism which rejects Enlightenment’s claims of the unquestionable power of reason, science and human progress. Post-modernism sees multiple ‘truths’ rather than a single ‘truth,’ deserting excessive conformity and conservatism of the modern movement. In this post-modern world we find people are happy to proclaim themselves ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’. As Sheila Larson says in *Habits of the Heart, 1985*, “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice...”



Messages from Acts 2:1-21

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 "In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20 The

sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.' (NRSV)

DNA of the early churches

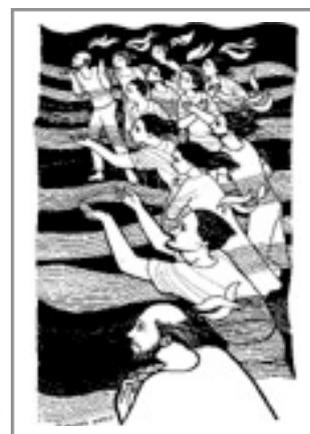
Read the passage together then discuss following questions:

1. What happened to the disciples when they received the Holy Spirit? What kind of power was it and how was it useful?
2. How did Peter change after his Pentecost experience?
3. How can we experience the presence of the Holy Spirit these days (see Galatians 5:22-23)?
4. What can we add to the characteristics of the early churches and disciples? Try to describe them using one or two adjectives. (e.g. 'Saved Community')

Closing prayer

Guide us God,
as we seek to follow you
in a world where darkness
overwhelms.
Help us recognise your
touch,
Your whispering voice,
Your call in the desert.
Grant us your strength God,
as we learn and live in your
way
and give us new hearts
and new eyes to see you.
Be with us on the journey
from darkness into light. Amen.

from *Finding Light in Darkness* 2014 by Alistair Macrae



POINT TO PONDER

We find people are happy to proclaim themselves 'spiritual' rather than 'religious'.

VERSE TO REMEMBER

"All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.." (Acts 2:4, NRSV)

“DNA of the Early Churches” 4

Week 4: Fellowship of the believers (Acts 2:22-47)

Four sessions in Advent:
 Week 1: What is the church? (Acts 1:1-11)
 Week 2: Who are the disciples? (Acts 1:12-26)
 Week 3: Who is the Holy Spirit? (Acts 2:1-21)
Week 4: Fellowship of the believers (Acts 2:22-47)

Prayer

God help us
 To rise up from our struggle
 Like a tree rises up from the soil
 Our roots reaching down to our trouble
 Our rich, dark dirt of existence
 Finding nourishment deeply
 And holding us firmly
 Always connected
 Growing upwards and into the sun. Amen.
Michael Leunig, When I talk to you, 2003

Getting Started

Consider these questions and spend a few minutes discussing them.

1. Try to recall what we learned last week and share about the contemporary manifestations of the Holy Spirit around us.
2. If we don't feel the presence of the Spirit, what could be the reason?

Post-Christendom *ekklesia*

“The church must change its tune for a world that needs our lyric but has stopped listening to our music.”(William H. Gross)
 To what tunes are this world likely to listen and respond? How can the church proclaim the good news when people are not interested in God's salvation?

Stuart Murray wrote in his book, *Church After Christendom*, that leavers might rejoin some kind of church:

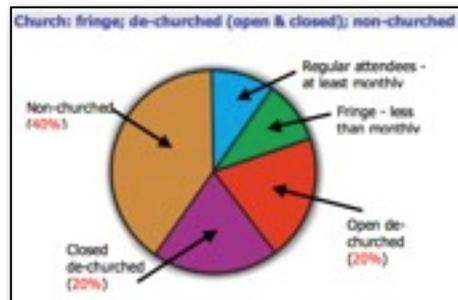
- where God is at the centre,
- that nurtures authentic friendships,
- that is self-critical and working towards healthy community practices,
- that treats adults as adults and encourages spiritual development,
- that fosters dialogue, etc.

An example where people have re-joined the church is the Alpha course in England which started at Holy Trinity Angli-

can church at Brompton in 1977. With the leadership of Nicky Gumbel from 1990, it dramatically expanded offering 33,500 courses in 163 countries in 2008. The Alpha course offered people the opportunity for friendship, sharing food, dialogue and Spiritual experience through its weekend programs.

Since 2004, the Fresh Expression movement has emerged in England, led by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York along with the Methodist Council. By 2014 it had grown to include more than 20,000 people involved in 518 fresh expression groups outside the church. Many other groups, like purpose-driven church, cell church, cafe-style church, cyber church, mid-week church and Pub church have emerged to accommodate people's spiritual needs.

No matter what the form of *ekklesia* (gathering), people have started to focus on the Mission of God (*Missio Dei*) rather than institutional maintenance.



Messages from Acts 2:22-47

22 "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— 23 this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. 24 But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was im-

possible for him to be held in its power. **25** For David says concerning him, "I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken; **26** therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope. **27** For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption. **28** You have made known to me the ways of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.' **29** "Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. **30** Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. **31** Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, "He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.' **32** This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. **33** Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. **34** For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, **35** until I make your enemies your footstool." ' **36** Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." **37** Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" **38** Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **39** For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." **40** And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." **41** So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. **42** They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. **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. (NRSV)

DNA of the early churches

Read the passage together then discuss following questions:

1. What can we learn from Peter’s message? How can you summarize his sermon?
2. Have a look at the list of characteristics of the earth church and disciples below. What can we add? Which characteristics do you feel are more important to others and why?
 - Week 1: Waiting, united, faithful, reframing, fearful, expectant, promised community.
 - Week 2: Praying, convinced, committed, inspired, devoted community (or disciple).
 - Week 3: Saved, inspired, spirited, growing, empowered, talented, multicultural, sharing, excited community.
3. Which characteristics can we find in our community of Port Melbourne?

Closing prayer

I am no longer my own, but yours.
 Put me to what you will,
 rank me with whom you will;
 put me to doing, put me to suffering;
 let me be employed for you or laid aside for you;
 exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full,
 let me be empty;
 let me have all things, let me have nothing;
 I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
 to your pleasure and disposal.
 And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
 you are mine and I am yours,
 to the glory and praise of your name. **Amen.**

The Covenant Prayer: Uniting in Worship, People’s Book, p 50

POINT TO PONDER

“The church must change its tune for a world that needs our lyric but has stopped listening to our music.”

VERSE TO REMEMBER

“They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42, NRSV)

