The Church in the New Testament
A study based on Acts

Diocese-Based Leadership Training Program
Mennonite Churches of East Africa (KMC/KMT)

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Introduction

**Purpose of the study:** To learn the nature and purpose of the church, God’s plan for the church, the life of the church, and the ministry of the church as described in the book of Acts.

**Summary of the study:** The church is God’s people, the community of persons redeemed and sent into the world as Jesus was sent, to represent the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ disciples obeyed his command to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations (Luke 24:47), to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

**The Church:**

The true church in the New Testament is not a building, or order of worship, or leadership positions. The true church is the people of God:

- Meeting together for worship and fellowship, with Jesus among them *(Matthew 18:20)*, and
- Proclaiming the God’s Kingdom and doing God’s work, as Jesus commanded them *(John 14:12)*.

The church is where the divine and human meet and join together to do God’s work, to continue the work of Jesus in the world.

There is a difference between the true nature of the church, and things that support the life of the church. Things like buildings, organization, and projects support the life of the church. They are important, but they are not the heart of the church as described in the New Testament.

Images of the church in the New Testament include the following:

- The bride of Christ – shows the church’s relationship with Jesus.
- The body of Christ – shows the church’s diversity of gifts.
- The temple of God – the church is the place where the God’s presence dwells.
- The light of the world, the salt of the earth – God works in the world through the church.
- People of God, disciples, saints, the household of God – the church is people, Jesus’ disciples.

Jesus’ life and ministry was guided by the Kingdom of God.

- Jesus began his ministry by announcing that “the Kingdom of God is near” *(Mark 1:15)*.
- Jesus’ miracles were “signs” of the Kingdom *(John 20:30)*.
- Jesus taught about the Kingdom with parables *(Matthew 13:24-50)*.
- Jesus prayed that God’s Kingdom would come to earth as it is in heaven *(Matthew 6:10)*.
- The Kingdom of God is the foundation for the nature and work of the church.

**What is the Kingdom of God?**

The Kingdom of God is God’s reign and authority.

- It is not an earthly kingdom *(John 18:36)*.
- The Kingdom of God is not complete until the final redemption *(Romans 8:23)* and all things are brought together in Christ *(Ephesians 1:10)*.
- But by the fruit of the Holy Spirit *(Galatians 5:22-23)* and as our life is guided by the Holy Spirit *(Romans 8:11)* we can see and taste in part the Kingdom of God. The church brings the Kingdom of God near in worship, in fellowship and in service *(Ephesians 1:14)*.

- Pentecost was the beginning of the church.
- There is no true church without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.
- The disciples obeyed Jesus’ command to be his witnesses to all people (Acts 1:8).

Understanding the text: (Read Acts 1-2)

Acts 1. What happened in the 40 days between the resurrection of Jesus and Pentecost.
   Acts 1:3-11. Jesus’ last words to the disciples
   - “He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the ___________ of ___________” (1:3).
   - “Do not leave __________, but wait for the __________ my Father promised. For John baptized with __________, but in a few days you will be baptized with the __________ __________” (1:4-5).
   - “You will receive __________ when the __________ __________ comes on you; and you will be my ___________. (1:8).
   - “After he said this, he was __________ before their very eyes.” (1:9).

Acts 12-26. Matthias chosen to replace Judas

   - “All of them were filled with the __________ __________” (2:4)
   - Peter’s sermon: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both __________ and __________.” (2:36).
   - “About __________ were added to their number that day” (2:41).

Life of the first church. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ __________ and to the __________ of __________ and to __________” (2:42).

Acts 1-2 describe four “pillars” of the church’s life:
- Sending: sent to proclaim the gospel to all people, to make disciples (1:8; Matthew 28:19).
- Power: empowered by the Holy Spirit (1:8; 2:4).
- Message: proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord (2:36); repent and be baptized (2:38).
- Meeting together: gather for teaching, fellowship, worship, prayer (2:42).

Questions:
1. Why did Jesus command the disciples to “wait” for the Holy Spirit? (1:4-5).
2. How do you see the power of the Holy Spirit in each of the following verses:
   b. Acts 2:14-36. _____________________________
   c. Acts 2:37-41. _____________________________
   d. Acts 2:42-47. _____________________________
3. Where do you see the work of the Holy Spirit in your church today? Give examples.
4. We teach that Jesus is Lord of our lives. Is Jesus also Lord of the political world? Or of nature?
5. Why is it important that people repent?
6. Is the fellowship described in verses 42-47 practical for us to imitate today?
7. Read the 4 “pillars” of the church’s life. Are these all part of your church?

- The church’s ministry continued the ministry of Jesus.
- The church faced opposition from the Jewish leaders.
- The church’s response to opposition was prayer.
- The church’s love for each other led them to share possessions and meet material needs.

Understanding the text: (Read Acts 3-4)

3:1-10. “Peter and John were going up the __________” (3:1) and they met “a man ______________ from birth” (3:2).

3:11-26. Peter’s sermon to the crowds. “It is __________ name” that healed this man (3:16).

        “Repent, then, and turn to __________” (3:19).

4:1-22. The Jewish leaders “were ________ ________ because the apostles were __________ the people” (4:2). “They commanded them not to ________ or ________ in the name of Jesus (4:18).

4:23-31. When the believers “heard this, they raised their voices together in ________ to God” (4:24).

4:32-37. “All the believers were on ________ and ________…. They shared __________ they had” (4:32). “There were no __________ ________ among them” (4:34).

Questions:

1. Peter and John met a man who was crippled from birth. What did he expect to receive from Peter and John? What did they give him?

2. People in our communities also have financial needs, emotional needs, physical needs, and family needs. What needs to you see among people today in towns and villages?

3. Do you think the church should try to meet financial needs in our towns and villages? What is your church doing to meet these needs?

4. Peter and John faced opposition from the Jewish leaders because they preached Jesus. Have you faced opposition because of your ministry to teach God’s word or to help someone in the name of Jesus?

5. What did the church do when they heard about the threats from Jewish leaders? (4:23-30).


8. Read Acts 11:27-30. The believers in the new church in Antioch heard about the needs of the church in Jerusalem and decided to help them. How can churches today help each other when there is a need?

9. What examples of the power of the Holy Spirit do you see in these chapters?

- Satan attacks the church from within through dishonesty and disunity.
- Satan attacks the church from without through threats, accusations and persecution.
- The church spreads and grows as a result of persecution. (Acts 5:14; 6:7)
- The apostles advised that other leaders be appointed to deal with food distribution so the apostles could focus on prayer and ministry of the word.
- Persecution is a normal part of following Jesus. (1 Peter 4:12-13)
- Persecution tests our faith and strengthens character. (James 1:2-3)

Understanding the text: (Read Acts 5-7)

Acts 5:1-11. Ananias and Sapphira brought a gift to the apostles but died because of dishonesty. “Satan has so filled your heart that you have _________ to the Holy Spirit” (5:3).

Acts 5:17-42. “The high priest and all his associates ... were filled with _________. They _________ the apostles and put them in the ________” (5:17-18).

Acts 6:1-7. “The Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being _________ in the daily _________ of _________” (6:1).

Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-60. Stephen was arrested and accused of _________. (6:11). Finally they “dragged him out of the city and began to _________ him” (7:58).

Acts 8:1-4. “On that day a great ____________ broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the _________ were scattered through _________ and _________” (8:1).

James 1:2-3. “You know that the testing of your faith develops ____________.”

Questions for discussion:

1. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira?
2. How has Satan attacked your church from within? Name the evil attitudes that have threatened the life of your church.
3. How should the church deal with dishonesty or disunity among its members?
4. Why did the Jewish leaders arrest the apostles?
5. Have you or your church face jealousy by people outside the church? How did you respond to those attacks on the church?
6. Acts 6:1-7 is the beginning of organization in the church. What made it necessary to appoint these men? How did it affect the growth of the church (6:7)?
7. What accusations did the Jewish leaders bring against Stephen (8:11-14)? Were they true?
8. Where was Saul when Stephen was stoned? (Read Acts 7:58, 8:1).
9. Who was leading the persecution of Christians? (Read Acts 8:3).
10. What kind of persecution does the church experience today?
11. How should we respond to persecution, according to 1 Peter 4:12-13?
12. How can persecution be helpful to the church?


- Two ways the church spread beyond Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria were through persecution and through evangelism.
- The church's most important task today is to obey Jesus' command to proclaim the gospel to those who have not heard it.

Understand the text: (Read Acts 8. Also see the maps at the end of this study booklet)

Acts 8:1-8. “Those who had been scattered __________ the word __________ they went” (8:4). Philip went down to a city in __________ and proclaimed __________ there” (8:5).

Acts 8:9-13. “Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced __________ in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great” (8:9). “But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the _______ of _______ and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized” (8:12). “Simon himself __________ and was __________” (8:13).

Acts 8:14-17. “When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent __________ and __________ to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the __________ _______” (8:14-15). “Then Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the __________ ________” (8:17).

Acts 8:18-25. “When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them __________ and said, Give me also this __________” (8:18-19).

Acts 8:26-40. “Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Go south to the road that goes down from __________ to __________” (8:26). “On his way he met an _____________. This man had gone to __________ to worship ...” (8:27). “Then Philip began with that very Scripture and told him the __________ ________ about __________” (8:35). “And Philip ____________ him” (8:38).

Acts 8:40. “Philip... traveled about, preaching the __________ in all the __________ until he reached __________” (Acts 8:40).

Questions for discussion:

1. Was persecution harmful to the early church or helpful to the church?
2. Do you know any examples of churches that were persecuted and how it affected them?
3. How does this chapter fulfill Jesus’ command to take the gospel to areas beyond Jerusalem?
4. How has our church in East Africa usually spread to new towns and cities?
5. Why are we slow to take the gospel to new areas that are unknown to us? What are some areas where we should take the gospel?
6. Peter and John prayed for the new believers to receive the Holy Spirit. How do we nurture new believers?
7. Read Matthew 28:19-20. How are we obeying Jesus’ command when we nurture new believers?

Africa in the early church:
- Simon of Cyrene (Libya) carried Jesus’ cross (Luke 23:26).
- Visitors in Jerusalem on Pentecost Day included persons from Egypt and Libya (Acts 2:10).
- Philip preached to the Ethiopian official and baptized him (Acts 8:27,38).
- Believers from Cyrene helped to start the church in Antioch (Acts 11:20).
Lesson 5. Saul becomes a disciple of Jesus. Acts 9

- Saul was educated as a Pharisee, a leader among the Jews (Acts 23:6).
- Saul led the persecution against the Christians (Acts 8:3; 9:1).
- When Saul was going to Damascus to persecute the Christians, he met Jesus in a vision and received a call to announce the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

Understand the text: (Read Acts 9)

Acts 9:1-2. Saul went to the high priest and asked for letters, “so that if he found any there who belonged to the ________, ...he might take them as ______________ to Jerusalem.”

Acts 9:3-6. “Who are you, Lord? Saul asked. I am ______________, whom you are ______________.”

Acts 9:10-16. “But the Lord said to Ananias, Go! This man is my ______________ to carry my name before the ________ and their kings and before the people of ______________ (9:15). I will show how much he must ____________ for my name” (9:16).

Acts 9:20-22. “At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the __________ of ________” (9:20). “Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving the Jesus is the ____________” (9:22).

Acts 9:26-27. “When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the ____________, but they were all _______ of him” (9:26). “But Barnabas took him and brought him to the ____________” (9:27).

Acts 9:31. “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of _______. It was ______________; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in ______________.”

Questions for discussion:

1. How was Saul’s life different after he met Jesus? Were there changes in his thinking? In his behavior? Make a list of changes you see in his life.
2. What are the signs that Saul became a disciple of Jesus?
3. Was Saul immediately accepted by the believers in Jerusalem as servant of Jesus? Why were they slow to accept him? Who introduced Saul to the apostles?
4. How did your life become different after you met Jesus? Can you name people who guided you in your faith after you believed in Jesus?
5. Do you know someone that you can encourage in their faith and Christian life?

More about Paul the apostle:

- Paul was one of the most important leaders of the church in the New Testament.
- Paul wrote 13 books of the New Testament. They were written as letters of encouragement and teaching to churches or persons that he had known.
- Paul was a great teacher, evangelist, church planter, encourager, writer.
- On his travels, Paul helped to start or establish at least 12 churches.
- Paul is known as the apostle to the Gentiles.
- Paul taught that salvation is not through the Jewish law, but through faith in Christ.

- The church spread to Joppa (in Judea), then to Caesarea (in Samaria), and to Antioch (in Syria).
- The first Christians were Jews and believed it is necessary to keep the Jewish law to be saved.
- As the gospel spread to the Gentiles, the Jewish believers learned that God accepts all people.
- The church in Antioch grew strong under the leadership and teaching of Barnabas and Saul.

Understand the text: (Read Acts 10-11. Also see the maps at the end of this study booklet)

Acts 10:9-16. Peter “saw heaven opened and something like a _________ _________ being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed _________, as well as _________ of the earth and _________ of the air. Then a voice told him, Get up Peter. Kill and eat” (10:11-13). “Surely not, Lord! Peter replied. I have never eaten anything _________ or _________” (10:14). “The voice spoke to him a second time, Do not call anything _________ that God has made _________” (10:15).

Acts 10:24-29. Peter “said to them, You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a _________ or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man _________ or _________” (10:28).

Acts 11:1-18. “So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers _________ him” (11:2). “Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened” (11:4). “When they heard this, they had no further objections and _________ God, saying, So then, God has granted even to the Gentiles _________ unto life” (11:18).

Acts 11:19-21. “Now those who had been scattered by the _________ ... traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to _________” (11:19). “Some of them, however ... went to Antioch and began to speak to the _________ also, telling them the _________ _________” (11:20).

Acts 11:22-30. “News of this reached the ears of the church at _________, and they sent _________ to Antioch” (11:22). “When he arrived and saw evidence of the _________ of _________, he was glad and encouraged them” (11:23). “Then Barnabas went to _________ to look for _________, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch” (11:25-26).

Saul was a “bridge” between Jews and Gentiles.
- He was born a Jew and trained in the Jewish law (Philippians 3:5-6).
- He understood Gentiles, because he was from Tarsus, a Gentile city (Acts 9:11).

Questions for Discussion:
1. Explain Peter’s vision and what it means.
2. How did Peter’s vision help him to accept the Gentiles?
3. Why was it important for the Jews to understand that God also accepts Gentiles?
5. What was the “evidence of the grace of God” that Barnabas saw? (11:23).
6. How does this account show the spread of the gospel to new areas?
7. Do some churches today have traditions that keep people from accepting the gospel? Explain.
8. Do we need people today who can “bridge” between cultures to proclaim the gospel to others?
Lesson 7. The gospel to the ends of the earth: Paul and Barnabas sent. Acts 13-14

- The church in Antioch was the first church to send evangelists out to proclaim the gospel.
- Barnabas and Saul traveled to the island of Cyprus, then to the regions of Pamphylia and Pisidia preaching and teaching in the Jewish synagogues.
- Both Jews and Gentiles believed the gospel.

Understand the text: (Read Acts 13-4. Also see the maps at the end of this study booklet)

Describe the important events that happened in each place:

3:4-5. Salamis, Cyprus.

Jesus’ sending strategy in Luke 10:1-12
- Go in groups of two (v.1)
- Go where Jesus is going (v.1)
- Prayer (v.2)
- Go as sheep among wolves (v.3)
- Carry nothing with you (v.4),
- Greet no one on the road (v.4)
- Seek the Person of Peace (v.5-6)
- Eat what is set before you (v.7-8)
- Heal the sick (v.9)

Questions for discussion:

1. How does the journey of Paul and Barnabas fulfill Jesus’ command in Matthew 28:19 to “go and make disciples of all nations?”
2. When Paul and Barnabas arrived in a new city, where did they usually begin to preach and teach?
3. Read Jesus’ instructions to his disciples in Matthew 10:5-16 and Luke 10:1-12 (see description above). Did Barnabas and Saul follow this pattern?
4. Is this a good method for preaching the gospel in a new city or village?
5. Should our churches be sending out evangelists to new areas as Barnabas and Saul were sent out?
6. Do you know places where the gospel has not been preached, and we should be sending people to bring the gospel?
7. How did Saul’s life and education prepare him for this work?
8. What experience and education will best prepare a person to bring the gospel to other cultures?

- Barnabas and Paul returned and visited each of the new churches where they had preached.
- They appointed leaders in the new churches.
- Barnabas and Paul returned to Antioch where they were sent out, and gave a report.

Understand the text: (Read Acts 14:21-28. Also see the maps at the end of this study booklet)

Acts 14:21-22. “Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, ____________ the disciples and ____________ them to remain true to the faith.”

Acts 14:23. “Paul and Barnabas _______________ in each church and, with prayer and fasting, _______________ them to the __________.”

Acts 14:26-28. “From Attalia they sailed back to ___________, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now ________________” (14:26). On arriving there, they gathered the ____________ together and _______________ all that God had done through them and how he had ____________ the door of faith to the ________________.” (14:27).

Instructions from Paul’s letter to Titus:

The tasks of church leaders:
- Organize leadership for ministries in the church (Titus 1:5).
- Encourage the believers; refute those who oppose sound doctrine (1:9).
- Teach sound doctrine and behavior (2:1-14): to older men, older women, young women, young men, servants.
- Maintain peace among people (3:1-2).
- Avoid foolish arguments (3:9).

Qualifications for church leaders:
- Respectful and respected by others, “blameless” (Titus 1:6-7)
- Healthy marriage and home life (1:6)
- Not a drunkard or greedy for dishonest gain (1:7)
- Hospitable (1:8)
- Sound doctrine (1:9)

Questions for discussion:
1. Why was it important to appoint leaders in the new churches? (14:23)
2. Read Paul’s instructions to Titus with the tasks and the qualifications for church leaders. Do you have a task you would add to these?
3. What happens in a church where the leaders do not do these tasks?
4. Do you have a qualification to add to these?
5. What happens in a church where the leader does not have these qualifications?
6. When Barnabas and Paul visited the churches, they “committed them to the Lord” (14:23). What does this mean? How did Paul relate to the churches he planted?
7. How were Paul and Barnabas obeying Jesus’ command to “go and make disciples?”
8. The New Testament does not mention church buildings. Does this mean we should not build churches?

- The first followers of Jesus were Jews who obeyed the Jewish law and thought all followers of Jesus must obey the law, including Gentiles who believe.
- Paul and Barnabas baptized new believers but did not require them to keep the Jewish laws.
- Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to discuss the question with the apostles and elders.
- The meeting affirmed that both Jews and Gentiles are saved by grace, not by keeping the law.

**Understand the text:** (Read Acts 15)

Acts 15:1-5. “Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: Unless you are ________________, according to the custom taught by ____________, you cannot be saved” (15:1). “So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem, to see the ___________ and ___________ about this question” (15:2).

Acts 15:6-21. “After much discussion, ___________ got up and addressed them. Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the ___________ might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe” (15:7). “We believe it is through the ___________ of our ___________ ___________ that we are saved” (15:11). “The whole assembly became silent as they listened to ___________ and ___________ telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the ___________ through them” (15:12). “When they had finished, ___________ spoke up” (15:13). “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the ___________ who are turning to __________” (15:19).

Acts 15:30-35. “The men were sent off and went down to ____________, where they gathered the ___________ together and delivered the ___________. The people read it and were ___________ for its ___________ ___________” (15:30-31).

**Words of wisdom from Acts 15 about dealing with differences:**
- It is not wrong to have differences; it is how we deal with our differences.
- We should not be afraid to discuss our differences.
- Everyone should be given opportunity to state their views.
- Look for areas of agreement between us.
- Focus on underlying principles, not behaviors or relationships.
- Respect the conscience of others you might not agree with.
- Avoid anger and anxiety; they are hindrances to dealing with differences.
- Leaders should seek guidance from the Holy Spirit and decide appropriate action.

**Questions for discussion:**

1. Why did some believers think that all Christians must be circumcised and keep the Jewish law?
2. Read Peter’s words in 15:7-11. Summarize what he said.
5. Why did the apostles and elders agree to those 4 things? Are they still laws for us today?
6. How were the recommendations received in Antioch? (15:31).
7. Do you think everyone agreed with the recommendations of the apostles and elders?
8. Read the wisdom from Acts 15 in dealing with conflict. Do you agree with them? What have you learned about dealing with differences?
Lesson 10. Starting and strengthening new churches. Acts 16-20

- Paul continued to travel to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.
- The gospel encountered idol worship, demons, and other religious traditions.
- Bringing the gospel sometimes brings opposition and persecution.
- Paul strengthened the new churches with encouragement and teaching.

Understand the text. Read Acts 16-20.

Notice the following things that are part of preaching the gospel in new areas:

**Paul faced challenges in preaching the gospel**

- Jealousy. 13:45
- Jewish customs. 17:5-9; 18:12-13
- Evil spirits. 16:16-24
- Idolatry. 17:16-33
- Roman religion. 19:23-41

**Paul met opposition and persecution because he preached the gospel**

- Jews stirred people up, were abusive (13:45,50; 17:13; 18:6)
- Jews plot to harm them, stoning (14:5,19; 20:3)
- Beaten and imprisoned (16:22-23)
- Jews started a riot (17:5); idol worshippers started a riot (19:28-29)
- Brought to court, false accusations (18:12-13; 19:9)

**Paul strengthened the new churches and believers with teaching and encouragement**

- Paul wrote letters to encourage churches and individuals. These are New Testament epistles.

**Training new leaders**

- Timothy mentored by Paul. 16:1-5
- Apollos mentored by Priscilla and Aquila. 18:24-26
- Titus mentored by Paul. Titus 1:5
- Paul instructed his students to teach others. 2 Timothy 2:2

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Which books of the New Testament were letters from Paul to encourage churches? Which were letters to encourage individuals?
2. If the gospel is good news, why does it meet opposition?
3. Have you faced any of the challenges listed above as you preached the gospel? Have you faced challenges not mentioned here?
4. How can you strengthen people in your church to remain faithful in the face of opposition?
5. Do you know of any place where Christians are persecuted because of the faith today? Where are they? Is there any way we can encourage them?
6. Do you have a plan to mentor someone for leadership? Describe your mentoring plan.
7. Do new churches face challenges not faced by established churches?
8. Where do we have churches that are new or in outlying areas? What should our church do to support and strengthen them?
9. How is training leaders obeying this command of Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20?

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Matthew 28:19-20
Map: Judea in the First Century
Map: First Missionary Journey of Paul and Barnabas