

UNDERSTANDING CHURCH

Understanding *our* church begins with understanding *the* church, the church described in the Bible. The first time the word “church” appears, it’s found on the lips of Jesus. He declared, “...I will build my church...” (Matthew 16:18). The word used in this verse (and throughout the New Testament) is a word that simply means “assembly” or “a group called-out”. If you ever went to a school *assembly* as a kid, then you know each grade or classroom is usually ‘called out’ to gather in the gym. In same way, Jesus spiritually calls people out of a sinful, straying world for his set-apart assembly, that is, his church.

So could we say Jesus came to be the founder of a new religious institution? That’s definitely not the language used in the Bible. Instead, the Scriptures tell us how Jesus formed a family; or more accurately, how Jesus brought us into “the household of God” (I Timothy 3:15). *Church* is not a building or a program or an organization or a social club. Church is a family, God’s family. This *called-out* community is composed of brothers and sisters who love and serve God as their Father. How is this possible? Because Jesus the Son died and rose, “that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:5).

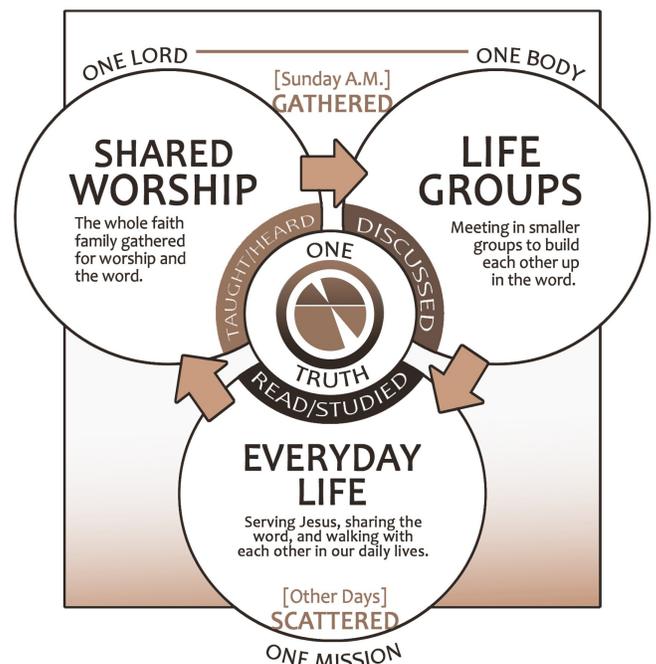
But why bring us together in this way? So that together we might continue the calling, building work Jesus began... so the whole world might be blessed! It’s our ‘family business’. The New Testament describes this work as gospel-sharing and disciple-making. Jesus told his first followers “that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name” (Luke 24:47), and that they should “go... and make disciples... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”. (Matthew 28:19-20) Gospel-sharing/disciple-making! Rather than being separate steps, these are two distinct sides of the same coin. Disciples (i.e., followers) are called through the gospel. But that same gospel also builds up disciples.

So how do we continue the work today? Well, taking our cues from the early church, we **gather** as a *faith family* on the “first day of the week” (i.e., Sunday)(Acts 20:7; I Corinthians 16:2) for worship, instruction, and encouragement (cf. Acts 2:42). But after that, we also **scatter**, that is, we return to the different circles in which God has placed us, in order to represent Jesus in both word and deed (cf. Colossians 4:5-6). This idea of being both the church *gathered* and the church *scattered* is visualized on the graphic to the right.

As Way of Grace, our time together on **Sunday morning** not only includes song and study as a larger group, but also meaningful connection in smaller group settings (“life groups”)(we see these same larger and smaller contexts in the early church as well—cf. Acts 2:46; 20:20). But as we hear the word of God and encourage one another with the word of God on Sunday, we are equipped to live out and share the word of God during the week. It’s in all these contexts (i.e., Sunday, Monday-Saturday, home, work, school, neighborhood, etc.) that the gospel-sharing/disciple-making work takes place.

So being the church with Way of Grace means attending our shared worship, connecting with a life group, and serving Jesus in your everyday life. That’s it! And all of this is informed by God’s word, specifically, our Bible reading plan. This calendar of readings (one chapter a day) serves as the basis for Sunday’s message/teaching, as well as the subsequent *life group* discussion.

What about our kids and youth? Sunday morning also includes time for our children to be encouraged in God’s word, as well as a *life group* just for our youth. And that encouragement is also connected to our Bible reading calendar, so the whole family can talk about the main topic or theme for that particular Sunday.



Does this format mean we only see our faith family on Sunday mornings? Absolutely not. One reason is that connecting with a *life group* should mean Sunday morning is simply a launching off point for continued community, encouragement, instruction, and service with one another during the week. Our hope is that these **other opportunities** (for all ages) will be driven more by personal relationships than programming, more by friendly invitation than formal announcements.

The word “church” can mean many different things to many different people. But the Bible is clear: the church is a people, a family; in fact, a faith family serving Jesus together. So if by the grace of God we belong to the church, let’s be the church according to God’s design. We hope you will join us!

