



When is a Church No Longer a Church?

What may seem like a crazy question is really a very serious question for every local church to address. When is a local church no longer functioning like the early churches we read about in The Acts of the Apostles? What is the correct definition of a church? If a local church is no longer a church, what is it?

Any one of these questions engenders a diversity of perspectives that Christian laity, ministers, theologians, and others debate regularly. The purpose here is not to declare definitively when a church is no longer a church. It is to invite all congregations to consider these questions spiritually and strategically, and to adjust, change, and refocus regularly as needed to stay in the center of what it means to be a local church.

One beginning point is Matthew 18:20 which declares if two or three people gather for the cause of Jesus Christ, He is spiritually present. Of course. That is a basic, core understanding of the whole movement of the Church – with a capital “C” – but that is not the same as a local church.

A local church is not greater than the Church. It is only a part. It is an expression of the Church which engages in multiple practices seeking to fulfill the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment.

Several times in the life of many local churches, they may struggle to show the practices of a local church. First, is in the early days of their formation when a group of people come together to form a new local church or congregation. This formation stage begs the question – Is this a local church yet? Denominational organizations – like CMBA, the SC Baptist Convention, and the Southern Baptist Church – legitimately ask this question. Yes, it is an expression of the Church, but is it a fully functioning local church yet?

That is why in our denominational system we urge each new local church to have a sponsoring church who will mentor them forward into a healthy and fully functioning congregation. But in the meantime, it is their connection to the sponsor that helps them become this fully functioning new congregational expression.

Second, is when a local church is without a clear empowering vision from God, or when it is mired in conflict, or both are present at the same time. This can happen any time in the life of a congregation. When one or both happen, the local church loses some of the zeal and effectiveness around the multiple practices of a congregation. They may even not engage in some of the practices for a season of their existence and must take

intentional spiritual and strategic actions to once again be a fully functioning local church.

Third, and perhaps the saddest time, is when a congregation has declined, aged, and even experienced dysfunction during the Retirement and Old Age stages of the congregational life cycle. When this happens, the local church focuses on making sure the heritage, traditions, culture, membership, and buildings of the congregation continue for the people gathered as the Church more than they engage in the practices of a local church beyond basic worship, fellowship, and mutual care.

These congregations reach a point when they are no longer a local church as both a gathered and scattered congregation. They function more as an overly churched culture fellowship than a New Testament congregation. Words that apply to them are “chapel,” “cultural club,” “support group,” “fellowship gathering,” and even “museum.” Local church in the New Testament sense no longer applies to them. Yes, the people are part of the Church, but the gathering is no longer a fully functioning local church.

Before defining the practices of a fully functioning local church, we would ask you to read and reflect on some scripture. Later we will share more of our perspectives on what makes a fully functioning local church. It is a key part of our associational strategy to help every congregation in our family of congregations to be a fully functioning local church.

Please read and reflect on Acts 1:6-8, Acts 2:41-47, Acts 4:12, Acts 4:31-37, Acts 5:42-6:7, and Acts 8:26-38. These are not the only relevant scriptures, but they are a beginning.