



Study Guide 7: STORY OF FAITH COMMUNITY

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. 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.

Introduction

- Why does church matter to you?
- How might someone who is not a Christian answer why church matters?

Know the Story

Read Acts 2:43-47

If possible, view the Video Supplement for “Story of Faith Community” found at www.elcaymnetorg/PD2015. Or read this summary of author John Cumming’s description of “*ekklesia*” (church) for this session:

“I challenge you to consider a different understanding of “*ekklesia*,” the original Greek word for church meaning “those called out,” “those called together,” or “the assembly.” 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 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.” The word “kingdom” in Jesus’ time would have been the equivalent of saying 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 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 of this early *ekklesia* from the passage in Acts. 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. 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 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.

- What does the text from Acts 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?

Be the Story

Based on this description of *ekklesia* (the early church), create your own idea of what faith community could look like today. Take a few minutes to draw or write how you might re-imagine your faith community. When everyone has finished, have participants share the faith community they created. Then discuss the following:

- What makes you excited about what you created? What do you like best about it?
- What opportunities does this type of faith community create?
- What are the barriers to creating this type of faith community?
- How might funding, politics, policies become an issue?
- What are ways you could address those issues?
- How is the faith community you created the same/different than the one you are part of?
- What would it take to create this type of faith community within your own faith community?

Tell the Story

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.

- How well do you know those who live in your church neighborhood?
- How might you get to know them?
- Keeping in mind the historical perspective of *ekklesia*, how might your church better serve the needs of those in your neighborhood? In your community?

Closing Prayer

Inviting God, open our eyes to the full stories of those in our neighborhoods and communities. Help us to build community in the places you have planted us, with you at the center of all our decisions and actions. Amen.

(Adapted from the PD2015 Session, "Story of Faith Community")

Learn More and Further Resources

Practice Discipleship is leadership development for the sake of faith formation. This dynamic partnership between the ELCA Youth Ministry Network, the ELCA and its Youth Gathering, seminaries and colleges provides leadership development resources for children, youth and family ministry leaders in the church.

www.practicediscipleship.org