

# What is the Church?

*“The church is people, equipped to serve, meeting needs everywhere in Jesus’ name.”*

As Kingdom Life seeks to further God’s Kingdom by doing His will on earth as it is in Heaven and reaching people with God’s presence, power and love, we believe that we are called to be a church as a force. When we gather as God’s people, His church, we desire to meet with God, to worship Him and to receive from Him so that we are healed, filled and equipped to touch a broken world for His Glory.

The following excerpt is taken, with permission, from Jerry Cook and Stanley C. Baldwin’s excellent book entitled, *“Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness – Equipping the Church to be truly Christian in a non-Christian world”*.

## The Church as a Field

Do you think of the church as an organized, corporate structure, located in the community at a specific address? Something to which you can direct people? Something identified, visible? Maybe with a steeple and maybe not, but a definitely located entity? That’s a partial description of the *church-as-a-field*.

In the field concept, the organized church is where the people come to do the work of God. A farmer’s field is where he plants his crops and does his work. Just so the field, as it relates to the church, is the arena in which the church does its work. Whatever is to be done by the church is done there. This concept—that the field is where the work is done—is crucial. You see, Jesus said, “The field is the world” (Matt. 13:38). From that it follows that the work of the church is to be done *in the world*. When we think that the believer’s meeting place is where the work is to be done, we have departed from the concept Jesus originally established. Instead of the world being the field, we have made the church the field.

This concept of the church-as-a-field will determine or at least temper all that the church does. Let’s consider how the “field” mentality affects the church in its emphasis, goals, ministry, and motivation. And then we’ll consider some of the end results.

The following description may be something of a caricature. It may exaggerate some features. Few churches probably fit the description completely. But I think the description will strike pretty close to home for many.

*What does the church-as-the-field emphasize?*

When we see the church building as the place where the work of God is to be done, we develop the kinds of emphases that will get people into that building.

First, we need a great deal of visibility. The church must be prominently located. People must see it and preferably should have to pass it daily en route to school, work and shopping. After all, how will they ever get there if they don’t know where it is? Not only must the church be very obvious, the leaders of the church must take on a very significant PR role. I’m not against public relations, but sometimes PR becomes one of the main things in this concept of the church. Because we have to become visible, the leadership—whether the pastor, the associate, or whoever—must get into the community primarily to bring visibility to the church.

Second, the happenings that take place in this building must be of such a nature that people will be attracted. Program and promotion become very important. A high-powered program and strong promotion, of course, demand a great deal of effort, money and organization. So the church’s emphases become visibility, organization, program, and promotion. I’m not saying these are bad. I’m questioning their validity as priorities. These are the main emphases in this concept of the church. We give a great deal of attention to these things, because we see the building as the place where action is.

### *What goals does the church-as-the-field have?*

The goals of the church-as-a-field are defined in terms of numbers in attendance, of budget and of facility. Those things tend to make up our concept of success.

Of course the goals are flexible. If we are not reaching great numbers then we change our success semantics from quantity to quality. We're after a few good men. And we've handled the success problem.

Budget? Obviously, it takes money to run a church. But when this becomes our goal, we have seriously confused means and ends. When we operate the church in order to get money enough to operate the church, we shouldn't be too surprised that people write off the church as something which is opposed to Christ.

Facility is vitally important to the concept of the church-as-a-field because the only way to increase the field is by enlarging the facility. If you are going to do a great work for God and it's all within the building, then you must have an enormous building.

### *How does the church-as-a-field go about accomplishing its ministry?*

An interesting thing here is that it does not have an adequate description yet of what its ministry is. Its ministry so far is to get people into the building, because that is where the work of God is done.

This work, once the people are gathered, centers around a professional. If people are going to be prayed for then the professional is going to be the person who does it because he has the professional hands. And when there are more heads than his hands can take care of we add another professional. So now we have four hands instead of two. As the field increases we have more heads than four hands can handle, so we add another professional. And then we departmentalize the professional so that we have hands in every area of the members' lives. What we are doing is setting up a rather stringent kind of professional approach to ministry.

The second thing about this kind of ministry is that the arrows all go in. By that I mean the organization is endeavoring to pull people out of the culture into the church. Everything is designed to draw people. We have contests, prizes, and outreach campaigns. I heard of one church that gave away green stamps. At another, the pastor promised to swallow a live goldfish when attendance hit a certain number. Anything, just get them in. Because this is where the action is.

Ministry becomes a positional identity within the organization. That is, if you are going to minister you must be director of something or minister of something or associate something. You will have a title and a position within the organizational structure. As a result, the individual member is easily misled about the meaning of Christian service and is often reduced to a spectator. You see, once he's in the field, unless he wins a position he has little relevance except to help keep the machine going.

He keeps his seat occupied and invites his neighbors, but that's not fulfilling so he becomes a bit confused. Then he either grabs for power or drops out. Or he regresses into a support or nonsupport role of the pastor's program. A lot of pastoral opposition stems from this kind of frustration in people's lives.

### *What motivates the church-as-a-field?*

Basically, the motivation of the church-as-a-field is to get people in. That is called evangelism. Once you have them in you must keep them in because if you don't the field is to shrink. So elaborate programs are designed to keep the people. This results in an enormous amount of programming. You had to program to get the people and now you have to program to keep them.

You also must get people serving the church. The reason this is absolutely necessary is that the church is the field. Therefore, if people are to serve the Lord at all, they are going to be doing it within the organization.

Very subtly, an interesting thing happens in our mentality if we are not careful. We begin to exploit people. We're reaching people, not because they are hurting, but because they can help us in our church

endeavors. *Just think, if that man with all his money would get saved, what he could do for this church. Or, What a good testimony for our church if that notorious sinner were saved here.*

Suddenly the purity of our motives is eroded, and that's a very dangerous thing. It means that at point we are going to start hurting people. People are going to get chewed up in the machine. At East Hill we pick up pieces of people who have been chewed up in religious machines. We pick them up by the basketful. People who have been hurt, who hate religion, hate the preacher, hate everything to do with the church package. Many of them have a real case.

It's not because anyone wants to hurt people. No pastor is in the ministry to hurt people. I've had pastors come and weep in my office, saying, "I like people. I want to help them. I've spent my life trying to help people, but it seems that at some point they get hurt." Often these pastors have been under such pressure to make the machine hum that they have allowed the people to suffer.

When the church is the field we are also motivated to compete with family, school, television and the world. That is no small task, but we must do it. Why? Because we have to rip people away from other things and get them occupied with the church program.

*Now, what are the dangers of this approach to church life?*

First, the pastoral role is distorted and misdirected. In evangelical churches, the pastor tends to become a superstar. Some men have the ability to carry that role well. Their platform manner magnetizes people. In personal relationships they exude charm and self-confidence. As administrators they rival the top executives in big business. But let's face it. There aren't many of that brand of cat around. True superstars are few and far between. The vast majority of pastors must live in frustration if they work in a situation that demands a superstar.

Under some ecclesiastical systems, the pastor tends to become a puppet instead of a star. He hasn't enough autonomy as a leader to take hold of things and make them happen. He has too many boards between him and what he wants to accomplish. So he becomes a political puppet, compromising everywhere and just trying to keep everybody happy. That's also frustrating.

Whether a pastor becomes a star or a puppet, he is being misdirected. His true role is to be neither of those. Rather he is to be an equipper of the saints.

Even more frightening than what happens to the pastor is what happens to the church. Again the tendency is to go in one of two directions. The end result is usually either mediocrity or subculturization.

Let's trace out how it works. Notice, we're talking end results here. The church-as-a-field may show absolutely no marks of mediocrity at the beginning. To the contrary, there may be great first-generation excitement. That group of people on whom the church was founded are blessed of God. They are excited, things are moving, the budget's always met, the building is coming, new people are present every Sunday. Everyone is awake. Hallelujah!

But the second generation is different, and I am not referring to the children of the first generation. I'm talking about the second wave of people who make up a church after it is well established. The building is complete. The income is adequate. The organization is functioning. The church settles into what I call a second-generation compromise. Everyone is quite comfortable now. The church program is going along nicely. The time for personal sacrifice is past. The people sit back to enjoy the fruits of their labors—or the labors of the first generation.

The stage is set for third-generation mediocrity. Nothing much is happening anymore. Faces change as people and pastors come and go, but that's about it. Even desperate attempts to shake things up, to get moving again, have little effect. Pastors get discouraged and leave, or settle into mediocrity along with the church. They sort of retire early, so to speak, giving up hope of anything significant happening but sticking with the routine anyhow. It's a living.

God help the poor pastor who ends up with third-generation mediocrity. But frankly, I think that's where most pastors are. That's why they shuffle. They trade this pastorate and its mediocrity for that pastorate and its mediocrity. They get about a year-and-a-half honeymoon out of it and then start looking

for another church. Mediocrity is always looking for a way out. Give some release and it may honeymoon with you for awhile. But it always has a way of settling back down if we don't change basic concepts.

The only hope is the rise of a new superstar who can capture the day and move us on to bigger and better things and lead us over the top for Jesus.

If the church-as-a-field does not end with mediocrity, it will end in subculturization. Or it may be both mediocre and subculturized. A subculture is a separate system within a system. It defines its own life-style, has its own speech, and tends to externalize its basic spiritual qualities. It develops its own community. When a church subculturizes, it becomes, as one writer put it, an island of irrelevance in a sea of despair."

That is, I think, a great danger for the Christian church. I see great segments of the church going in that direction or already there. The tendency always is to establish a community in which there is uniformity. That way we don't have to worry about error or non-predictability creeping in. So the church tends, on the wave of revival, to take the result of that revival and institutionalize it. Years later the institution remains, but the life is long gone.

We tried to go the subculture route at East Hill in the early days. We didn't know any better. We had a close-knit group of about 10 families, and our basic aim was to solve all our own problems, keep our group intact, and add to our little community.

We had visions of establishing a Christian commune. We never were able to pull it off because someone would always come in who didn't look as we did, didn't talk as we talked, and didn't give a hang about our little community. We were always having to convert these people to our community concept. Finally we began to get the message. I was praying one day for the Lord to give me the community and the Lord stopped me. "Never pray for that *again*," He said. "I am not going to give a community to you. Instead I want you to pray, Lord, give me to the community."

This was how I finally awoke to the fact that God didn't want us to be a separate subculture, He wanted us to penetrate every segment of the society in which He had placed us.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13). Salt, to have any effect at all, must be mixed in with the substance which needs salt. Nobody but a collector sets up saltshakers and admires them. A subcultured church is like a saltshaker on display.

Whether the church-as-a-field leads to mediocrity on the one hand or to a Christian subculture on the other, the result is the same. The world concludes that religion may be OK for some but it's irrelevant to real life. And Christianity is just another irrelevant religion.

Obviously these are gross generalizations. But these are concepts one must work through to arrive at any adequate definition of the church.

## **The Church as a Force**

*The church is people, equipped to serve, meeting needs everywhere in Jesus' name.*

Do not underestimate the preceding statement. That concept of the church will affect everything: the way the pastor preaches, the way the church is organized and promoted, the way the program develops, and the way the building is designed.

This concept of the church is so decisive that if you don't see it in the thoroughgoing context I have just suggested, you do not understand what I am saying.

Among other things, I'm saying that we need to direct the church away from professionalism and into the hands of people who do not know what they are doing. I want to say from firsthand experience that this policy is both scary and at times utterly ridiculous, but always, in my mind, necessary.

As we did with the church-as-a-field, let's examine the emphases, goals, ministry, and motivation of the church as a force. And consider the results.

*What does the church-as-a-force emphasize?*

In this concept of the church-as-a-force, the field is the world, as Jesus said. That is where the work is to be done. The emphases in the church-as-a-field model are visibility, organization, program and promotion. The church-as-a-force emphases are worship, training, and fellowship, because *these are the things that produce Spirit-filled people who can meet others' needs in Jesus' name*.

When our people gather on Sundays and on Thursdays, they are not the church at work. To attend services is not to serve the Lord. Services are for what we might call R and R, rest and restoration, and this includes worship and celebration. We get together, we sing, we clap, we praise God, worship, meet one another, talk about Jesus. We don't hear any profanity or dirty Stories, It's tremendous, It's unadulterated fun and enjoyment in a pure, clean, loving environment.

When we meet, we read the Bible and the Lord speaks to us in various ways. Brothers and sisters more gifted than we in certain areas minister to us. We thoroughly enjoy it. We're healed. Our lives are changed. We receive tremendous blessings. Why? So that we can gather for a repeat performance on Thursday night because by then we'll need to be pumped up again?

No! The church is rested and restored at meetings so that they can work in the world all week long. The church is at work right now. People are sitting in board meetings where they are employed. They are driving taxis and trucks and buses. They are meeting in council chambers, in the legislature, in commissioners' offices. They're teaching classes. They're milking cows. They're changing diapers. They are all over the community.

When we get together the next time, we'll share what's been going on. We'll rejoice together over our victories and pray about our needs. Some people are going to be present who were caught in that work of the church out in the world. They are going to begin to understand what Jesus' life-style is all about. It's a powerful thing.

We worship, we pray, we fellowship, we learn.

*What goals do we set?*

The church-as-a-field has goals expressed in numbers, budget, and facility. The church-as-a-force has goals that are personal and individual: We want each member to come to *wholeness*, be *equipped*, and be *released* into the world to minister. Our basic assumption is that the Holy Spirit who fills the pastor can fill every believer to whom the pastor preaches. And each believer is potentially capable of ministering just as surely as the pastor is, though perhaps in a different way.

The role of a pastor is to help Christians start living in the light of the truth. Evangelical Christians tend to have a lot of religion in their hearts, a good bit in their heads, but not much in their feet. And Christianity that doesn't walk around in shoes isn't worth much. It has to walk in shoes, all kinds of shoes—sandals, boots, high heels, and suedes. It has to walk. The role of a pastor is to teach people how to get their Christianity to walk right. If we only teach them how to think Christianity and how to feel it, but not how to walk it, we are failing.

Most church members are content to watch the pastor walk. "Pastor made 435 calls this month!" And the poor pastor. He is chewing Roloids. He's drinking Maalox. His cheeks are sunken. His face has a yellow pallor. And the people come on Sunday mornings and get upset because he doesn't feed them steak. The best he can do is serve a little warmed-over soup. He's been busy.

Do you follow me? It's not my job as pastor to minister to every need in the church. I don't intend to do that. My job is to teach everybody in the church how to minister.

The Bible says that pastors are supposed "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:12). Take careful notice of this Scripture for it is foundational to the concept of the church-as-a-force.

Preparing God's people—that's my job, and that's a whole different ball game from doing the ministry myself. The church needs to place its members in a healing environment of love, acceptance and forgiveness. We must bring people to wholeness in such an environment, equip them, and then release them.

### *What is the ministry of the church-as-a-force?*

The automatic result of great healing is great outreach. As people come to wholeness, they minister. Other people are touched.

When the church is a force the ministry-by-professionals-only tendency of the church-as-a-field yields to a ministry by all the believers. Along with this comes an altering, even a dissolution, of the traditional lay-clergy role. That is easy to say but it's hard to do in an established church. People don't know how to let it happen. They don't know how to cope with a pastor who actually expects the people to carry on the ministry. They almost demand that the pastor do the work.

The breakdown of the clergy-layman distinction is also frightening for pastors. The pastor is losing his safety zone and he feels vulnerable. People know he is as human as anyone else, though he happens to be a pastor. That's very threatening to some men. They fear they will not be respected any longer, that their leadership capability will be impaired. Many men are even taught in seminary not to be friends with church members—to keep a “healthy distance” away from the people.

Pastors are in fact as human and fallible as anyone else. Why play charades then? What good is leadership that must depend on falsehood for its strength?

I do not believe in vertical relationships in the church. I do not believe in the emergence of an elite in the church. You see, I have no power over anyone simply by virtue of the fact that I am a pastor. The only way I can function as pastor in anyone's life is if he lets me. If he doesn't want me to, there is not a thing I can do. I have no power to make anyone bend.

I could threaten people. I could set up a system of political pressure. But as a pastor, I must make it one on one with people. In order to do that, I must be an authentic person. That means I must take the risk of being open and transparent.

Being open is scary. And in some fellowships it is downright risky, as James D. Mallory, Jr. describes:

One time in a Sunday school class on love within the family, Betsy admitted she sometimes had hateful feelings toward me or the children. The other members of the class clearly were not used to such honesty and immediately hid behind a pious cloak, suggesting they should pray for poor Betsy, who obviously was in dire straits as a Christian.

Many are afraid to take the type of risk Betsy took because others might think they are not very good Christians if they admit some of the foolish things they do and the destructive thoughts and feelings they have.

Betsy's honesty in the class ultimately paid off, however, and others began to share some of their problems. They began to function as the body of Christ should function. They could pray honestly and specifically for each other.

In the church-as-a-force there is a climate of love, acceptance and forgiveness. The pastor is not living a life of pretense as if he were somehow different and better than others. These two elements alone do much to make the church a healing fellowship in which our Betsy's and everyone else can be real and open.

In the church-as-a-force the pastoral leadership is also constantly endeavoring to facilitate the ministry of the members. This means the pastor carefully avoids usurping that ministry. He does not do the work for the people but involves them in doing it themselves.

A man asked me to pray with him about his living situation. He lived in a large apartment complex and felt like Lot in Sodom because of the things going on there. He really wanted to move. Our church could have responded to this situation in a number of different ways. For one, we could have built and operated our own apartments. Financially, we could have handled that with no problem. We had already been approached with that proposal and had property on which to build. But that was not our choice. If we ever did build an apartment house, we would limit the percentage of Christians living in it. However, I couldn't just say to that man, “No, I'm not going to pray with you. Sit there and tough it out.”

I said, "Listen, you are not there by accident. Let's begin to work and facilitate some ministry for you. Let's pray. Let's fast, and we'll see what the Lord says to us."

I soon discovered a lot of other people in our church were in similar circumstances. One Sunday night after service we gathered everyone who lived in apartments; a whole roomful of people. I said, "How many of you feel like you want to move?" Many raised their hands. I said, "Why don't we stop asking God for a place to move and start asking Him for a way to infect the place we live? How can we have such a case of Christianity that we become an epidemic?"

They just lit up. The first thing they wanted was for me to appoint a staff member to come and teach a Bible study at their places. I said, "No, I'm not about to do that. That's crazy. Why increase the staff? You live there. How many of you are filled with the Holy Spirit?"

Then they thought I was saying, "Go down by the pool every Sunday morning, set up a pulpit. Open the Bible, and say 'hear ye, hear ye!'" I was not saying that at all.

"I'm simply saying to be open for business." I explained. "Now what does that mean to you?"

One fellow decided he should write out his testimony and post it on the bulletin board. He happened to be in charge of an apartment building for 400 adult students of Mt. Hood Community College. He had been a bartender a few months before.

He posted his testimony on the bulletin board, where all the messages are. He attached a note, "If you want to talk about this, see me, manager's apartment. A steady stream of people began coming to him. Now wouldn't it be foolish to put that man on staff? Or hire someone else as minister of apartment evangelism? Ministry is people filled with the Holy Spirit meeting the needs of other people in Jesus' name."

*What is the motivation of the church-as-a-force?*

What are we trying to accomplish? We are trying to bring healing to the whole man, to every area of a person's life. We are not out to use or exploit people, as is the temptation in the church-as-a-field.

The church-as-a-force becomes a healing agency in the community, not a place of refuge from the community. Nor is the church a competitor with the world. We don't want to compete but to change priorities so that family, school, vocation, entertainment and the rest take their proper place.

For example, one exciting thing we're developing now is the concept of parents and children spending 12 years or more together as a healing unit in the public school system. That, to me, is a fantastic alternative to starting our own schools. I'm not opposed to Christian schools, but that is not God's call to our particular church. I'm not against Christian colleges, but I think the believers who have had no Christian background should be the ones attending them. Christian people who have been in church all their lives ought to be the ones attending secular colleges.

We are not in the world to compete but to change priorities. I don't care whether every family in our church has a television set or several of them. I do care that they understand priorities enough to know when to turn the set on and off. And that doesn't come from me going through the TV guide with them each Sunday morning to give them the recommended programs or placing the approved programs in the church bulletin.

*The church-as-a-force concept is not without potential dangers.*

Most pastors get nervous when the ministry is placed in the hands of nonprofessionals. Ordinary people start going off in all directions, witnessing, caring, praying for the sick and distressed. The pastor may not even know about everything that's going on and he may begin to feel that things are out of control.

In fact, things are out of control, but a pastor need not be intimidated by this. I've decided that if only what I can control is allowed to happen through our congregation, not much will happen.

In the church-as-a-force, the pastoral role is dynamic and in constant refinement. That is also threatening to some pastors. You see, as the church is developing the pastor's role is also developing

within that context. I'm doing different things now than I did a year ago, and I never do arrive. I must keep on responding to what God is doing in the Body.

Another danger in the church-as-a-force is the confusion that arises because of nontraditional structures and patterns of action. People who come to us with the field mentality deeply ingrained do not understand us. We are always having to educate a new wave of people. In three years we went from under 500 to about 3,000 members. That gave us a big job to do in communicating the principles upon which our church is built.

Despite these and other possible dangers, the end results of the church-as-a-force are wonderful. The true pastoral function to equip the saints for the work of the ministry is preserved. That is vitally important for, according to Scripture, that is the only true function a pastor has. That's it. And as much as a pastor can dedicate himself to that single work, he is fulfilling his ministry.

Individual member ministry is also preserved under this model of the church, and that too is crucial. I've found that people get excited when they have a reason for being Christians other than getting out of hell. People get bored just waiting for heaven. So what do they do? They start complaining, griping, gossiping. The reason they are bored is that they don't know what they are saved for. They know what they are saved from and what they are saved *to* but not what they are saved *for*.

Frankly, Christians get tired of hearing evangelistic sermons continually. Many pastors try to evangelize audiences made up of 99 percent Christians. "What if one sinner is there?" they ask. I reply that if one sinner is there and he can survive authentic praise and worship and fellowship, he is an amazing creature. If he can survive that, no sermon you can preach will get to him.

Too often we are caught preaching to a minority while the majority are sitting there bored to death and wondering, *What in the world am I doing here?* The only thing that can justify their coming is to bring a sinner with them. Then they can go home and say, "Well, I sure didn't get anything, but at least the pastor talked to my neighbor."

The greatest criticism people make of their pastor is not that he doesn't love them or care for them but that he is not feeding them. That is terrifying when, in fact, the total role of the pastor is to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry.

When the saints start doing the ministry, they get excited, and the church truly becomes a force for God in the world.