

# THE CHURCH AND ITS PURPOSE

## INTRODUCTION

At Eastside, we are committed to letting God's word be the guide and standard for every aspect of our lives—both individually and corporately.

**We believe** that the Bible is God's trustworthy and final authority in all matters (Ps. 19:7-11; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). We desire to hold a biblical vision that honours the Lord. **We believe** that this will glorify God most and result in the flourishing of all members in our church.

As part of a commitment made when Eastside and Bayside became one church, it was agreed that after a period a new constitution would be developed. This 'discussion paper' is the first in a series of papers developed by the elders intended to stimulate biblical discussion and reflection among our membership. The papers in the series will include:

1. **The Church & its purpose**
2. Meaningful membership
3. Membership requirements
4. Authority structures in the church

## NEXT STEPS AHEAD

The release of these papers will be accompanied by teaching and opportunities for discussion.

You will see that throughout the paper are questions for reflection and consideration. There are also resources for further exploration. We'd encourage you to submit your biblical reflections—positive and corrective—on these papers to the elders. These will then be used by the elders to develop the draft constitution that will be submitted to the members for consideration and approval.

## WHAT IS A CHURCH

**We believe** that the church is created by God. As Christians, we know that we should go to church and that being part of one is important if you are a Christian. But what exactly is a church?

**Discussion question:** What have you understood the word 'church' to mean?

The word church is a compound word that is comprised of two parts that together mean *to call by name*. As we look at the New Testament, we see that God is the one that *calls out* the church through repentance and faith in the risen Lord Jesus (Mark 1:15), and the subsequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). This means that church is created by God, not us.

## LOCAL & UNIVERSAL CHURCH

**We believe** in both the local and universal church. When reading the Bible carefully, it becomes clear that the Bible uses the word church in two interrelated but different ways. The first way is what we might call the *universal church*—all Christians from all time who will one day worship the Lamb of God (Rev 5:9; 7:9).

The second and more frequent way that the New Testament uses the word church is to refer to the *local church* (1 Cor 12:27; 2 Thess 1:1). **We believe** that a local church is an earthly manifestation of the universal church. In local churches believers submit to one another in love (Eph 5:21-33), pursue the one another commands (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13), embrace godly authority (Acts 14:23; Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:5), and celebrate the ordinances together (1 Cor 11:17-34).

Don Carson explains: "*Each [local] church is the full manifestation in space and time of the one, true, heavenly, eschatological, new covenant church. Local churches should see themselves as outcroppings of heaven, analogies of the Jerusalem that is above, indeed colonies of the new Jerusalem, providing on earth a corporate and visible expression of the glorious freedom of the children of God.*"<sup>i</sup>

**We believe** that the universal church must not be used as an excuse for individualism. Today's spirit of individualism means that we are prone to using the universal church as an excuse for self-centredness and neglect of the local church.

This all stems from a line of reasoning that goes something like this: “I don’t need my local church, because I’m part of the God’s church.” In other words, “I’m a member of the universal church, so the local church doesn’t matter.”

This is seen practically in the high transfer rate between local churches, the negative attitude towards committing to a single local church, low membership rates, and a growing trend toward low attendance. Basically, there is an increasing trend towards low commitment to a local church. This is often justified by appealing to the universal church.

**Discussion question:** In what ways can you see individualism impacting upon a Biblical vision of the local church?

Yet the Bible does not envisage a people who are part of the universal church but are not willingly and mutually submitting to a local gathering of believers. For example, when Paul commands the Ephesians to “be kind, tender-hearted and forgiving to one another (Eph 4:32)” he wasn’t commanding that they do this until they decide that it is easier to move to another local church. Or when Paul commands the Philippians church to “consider others better than yourself (Phil 2:3),” he wasn’t asking them to do this until being humble is too hard.

In summary, all throughout the New Testament, it is assumed that the local church is the place where we reflect and live out our commitment to the universal church this side of eternity. In other words, God intends that healthy members of the universal church would be committed to their local church.

## PURPOSE DEFINED BY GOD NOT US

**We believe** that because the church is created by God, he gets to define its purpose. Often you hear local churches talk about their strategy and vision for the church. It can give the impression that we create the church and we call the shots. But if God ‘calls out’ the church and dwells in it by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16-17), then logically he decides the purpose.

What purpose then does God have for his church? Developing a simple answer to this question is complicated because there are many passages that tell us about good things the church should do. For example, we are commanded to: “go and make disciples (Matt 28:16-20)”; “equip the saints (Eph 4:12-16)” “love one another (John 13:34);” “care for the poor (Matt 19:21);” and “preach the Bible (2 Tim 4:2).”

You may have noticed that often people (perhaps even yourself) have a preference about what the church should be doing. For example, those that are evangelistically wired will expect that all of the church’s activities and teachings will be directed at the unbeliever. Or if “loving one another” is your preference then you’ll expect that pastors should be doing three days of visitation a week.

There are many good things that a local church can and should be doing. But it is important to step back to try and observe an overarching purpose that weaves all of these things together.

## ONE BIG PURPOSE—GOD’S GLORY

**We believe** that the church is created by God, for the glory of God. God’s goal from the very beginning was to have a people for himself that would reflect his character and glory. This is why God created humans to bear his image (Gen 1:28)—to reflect and image forth his worth and beauty. We could go one step further and say that everything that God spoke into existence is created to bring glory to God. “*The heavens declare the glory of God (Ps 19:1)*”; “*Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over the earth (Ps 108:5)*”; “*Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name, worship the Lord in the splendour of his holiness (Ps 29:1-2)*.”

As we progress through salvation history, we see that God brought people out of slavery in Egypt for his glory (Ex 14:4); he gathered and formed a people for his glory (Isa 43:20-21); he exiled and punished his people for his glory (Isa 48:9-11). Furthermore, God looked forward to a new covenant (that is the basis for the church) for the sake of his glory: “*Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name...And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name. And the nations will know that I am the Lord. (Ezekiel 36:22-23; cf. v. 32)*.”

Drawing this all together, Charles Bridges helpfully explains that: *“The Church is the mirror, that reflects the whole effulgence (joy and goodness) of the Divine character. It is the grand scene, in which the perfections of Jehovah are displayed to the universe.”*<sup>ii</sup> In other words, the church is created by God and it is for his glory (Eph 3:8-11).

This means that Eastside does not exist for itself. Eastside is not a service provider that exists for its members. Rather, **we believe** that everything we do is to be shaped by a desire to reflect the character, worth and excellency of God.

Tim Challies explains the implications of God’s glory being the unifying purpose of the church. He writes: *“When we understand that the local church exists by God and for God, we see that God’s glory, not the needs of saved or unsaved people, is meant to be the ultimate determining factor for all the church does. The church does emphasize reaching the lost and it does emphasize edifying the saved, but it does so in ways that are honouring to God and consistent with his will. It ensures that both the method and the message of the church bring glory to his name.”*<sup>iii</sup>

**Discussion question:** How does knowing that God’s glory is the overarching purpose of the church bring clarity to what we do?

### THREE SMALLER PURPOSES

Underneath God’s glory, it has generally been accepted throughout church history that there are three ways in which we bring glory to God. These three interrelated ways are: 1) Worshipping God, 2) Building up the saints; and 3) Engaging in God’s mission.

**We believe** that a local church is called to worship God. Worship of God is not limited to singing. Rather, it is about a whole of life that orientated toward rightly responding to God’s revelation of himself (Rom 12:1-3). This revelation is both word-centred and Jesus-centred. The word of God is all about the pre-eminent Word of God—Jesus—*“who became flesh and made his dwelling among us* (John 1:14 cf. 2 Cor 1:20).”

**We believe** that a local church is called to build up the saints. When we come to the Lord Jesus, we join his body and family. To be a Christian means that we have died to ourselves, and now live for Jesus and his body—the church (2 Cor 5:15; Gal 2:19-21). We do this by loving one another (John 13:35), bearing one another’s burdens (1 Thess 5:11), and encouraging one another to grow in the likeness of Jesus (Eph 4:12-13).

**We believe** that a local church is called to engage in God’s mission. Because the church is “the body of Christ” and Jesus is sent by his Father to save the lost (John 3:17), it is impossible for the church to be anything less than missional (Matt 28:16-20; Acts 1:7-8). Jesus himself said to his disciples: *“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you* (John 20:21).”

Importantly, though, mission is not an end in itself. Rather, mission exists so that every person might rightly respond to God and bring glory to him. Before going to the cross Jesus also prayed to his Father: *“I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.* (John 17:4-5)”

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the church is **created by God and is for his glory**. There are three ways that the church should bring glory to God: 1) worshipping God by rightly responding to him in every way; 2) building one another up in the Lord Jesus; and 3) engaging in God’s mission so that others will glorify God.

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<sup>i</sup> Don Carson, “Evangelicals, Ecumenicism, and the Church,” in K. Kantzer and C. Henry. *Evangelical Affirmations*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990 (pg. 366.)

<sup>ii</sup> Charles Bridges. *Christian Ministry*. London: Seeley and Burnside, 1830 (pg. 1).

<sup>iii</sup> Tim Challies, *What’s the Purpose of the...Church?* (<https://www.challies.com/articles/whats-the-purpose-of-the-church/>)  
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