

CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS

Rediscovering Relational Faith

Acts 2:42-47 (ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.



Be begin in the past...

We are starting Week I of our 2026 Lenten Journey. This week we explore what it means to participate in “church without walls”, not just attending a service, but living in a faith community that forms, challenges, and sustains you wherever you are.

Some of us may have been hurt by church, or may feel cautious, or simply curious. Week I is an invitation to see church differently: relational, participatory, historical, and formative.

Words:

The Christian church has our own language. Circle or underline what is new or confusing, and we will try to explain all of them.



In church leadership, we sometimes use words that feel familiar to us but confusing to others. We assume people will pick them up along the way - but that's not fair and not always the case. These are some of the more significant "church words" we might use.

Sacrament

Latin: *sacramentum* originally meant a solemn pledge or oath in Roman law. For the first three centuries of the Christian church, it was not a Christian word. While baptism and eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, were practiced as part of regular faith and membership, they were not considered "sacraments".

That only changed in the years following the Edict of Thessaloniki, February 27, 380 CE, when Roman society took over the Christian faith. Eventually in later Christian meaning, it came to represent a sacred ritual pointing to God's grace. Eventually it started being used as a ritual of judgement, exclusion, and obedience, with the church deciding who God found worthy.

Mysteries

Instead the early Christian community used the Greek for "mystery" to identify sacred practices like baptism and the Lord's Supper. These were intentional rituals experienced deeply in community but not fully explained.

Liturgy

Structured rituals of worship, teaching, and communal practice. They were the shared prayers, meals, discussions, and rhythms that form the community. They provided a spine for faith, not a cage. People could relax into the knowledge that everything would be covered because they knew what to expect next as part of their time together.

Agape Meal

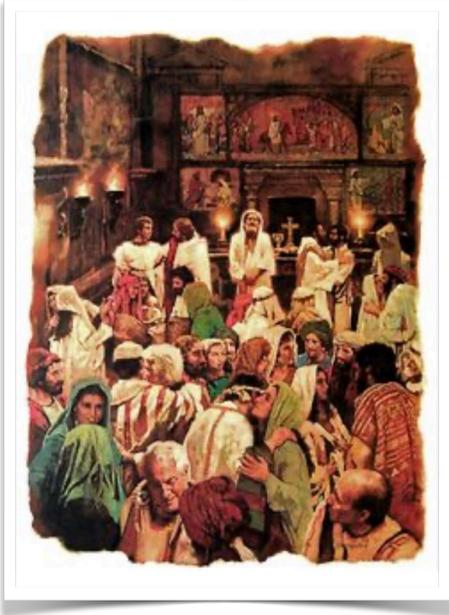
Greek for "community love." This was the shared meal where early Christians came together, and the Lord's Supper was part of the ritual of Agape.

Formation

Education was the centrepiece of community. Early church life was about mentoring, shared practices, generosity, and worship.

Bishop & Deacon

These were not titles in the early church, but jobs to do. Bishops were responsible for education and worship, Deacons for money and caring for the community. Jobs moved from person to person.



Worship in the first centuries of Christianity

Early Christians followed the Hebrew tradition when it came to worship.

They sang Psalms.

They offered prayers and took turns praying.

They read from the Hebrew Scriptures, letters from early Christian leaders like Paul or perhaps even Priscilla.

They welcomed travelling apostles and let them teach or reflect on the scriptures they had read.

And they talked. They were not passive participants like we have in most church communities today, they had real discussions and debates about the faith.

What did the church look like in the beginning?

Acts 2:42-47 (front page) gives us a window in to the relational and participatory church of the first centuries. These gathers were not like the modern Sunday services, but rather hours long intergenerational community gatherings where life and faith were intertwined.

Teaching was the primary focus. There was an apprenticeship style of learning, questions encouraged, answers shared amongst the group, and always under the leadership of the bishops or the apostles travelling from other communities.

Children and adult learned together.

Eventually they would begin their evening meal where everyone had contributed, and the bishop, with the help of the deacons, would reenact the Lord's Supper, breaking bread that was passed among all of those who were present. Deacons then took the leftovers for those too old or sick to have joined that Sunday evening's gathering.

Resources were shared and managed by the deacons.



Church With Walls Today

Church today often feels like:

- Watching someone else “run the show”
- Listening passively
- Programs without real participation

While some churches do make efforts for more engagement, worship today does not have the same feel of asking questions, sharing stories, laughing together. There is often a lack of energy, connection, and relational depth. The larger shared weekly meal has almost completely disappeared from Christian worship.

As a worship leader I have had the experience of congregations that just sit there and congregations that talk back, ask questions, and laugh at what is happening. The energy in an engaged congregation is very different from one that simply sits as an audience.



CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS IS NOT ABSENCE OF STRUCTURE. IT IS PARTICIPATION, RELATIONAL DEPTH, AND FORMATION ROOTED IN FAITH THAT SURVIVES OUTSIDE WALLS. TOGETHER AND EXPLORING THEIR FAITH.

Historic Faith Communities

The Desert Mothers & Fathers of the first centuries saw their roles as mentors. Those with more experience had apprentices, and they participated in the small worship communities that gathered around them.

In Ireland, the church developed differently than that with Roman influence. They were decentralized, so no structured authority reaching over the entire series of worshipping communities. They were intergenerational, and developed their own forms of worship and caring for each other.

In countries where Christianity was outlawed, secret communities were created that looked a lot like the earliest church: taking care of each other, worshipping in people's homes or workplaces, teaching each other, and reading whatever Christian scripture and letters they could access.