



TEN FUNCTIONS OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

While teaching at the FWB Bible Institute in Bouna, Cote d'Ivoire, Africa, I was constantly challenged not to impose my cultural understanding of the church on the Ivorian pastors and leaders. This led me to focus more on the biblical functions of the local church rather than on the forms practiced.

This line of thinking pushed me deeply into the historical narrative of the “Church” in the New Testament to discover the functions of the early church transferable across the time-culture continuum. I developed my classes at the Institute around this timeless focus rather than on programs, activities, buildings, personnel, etc. Obviously, these factors come into play, but they are primarily culturally dictated.

This document is not meant to be a definitive statement on the matter, but rather a launch pad for discussion on a very important issue—the Church.

Two fundamental questions are:

What is the Church? The *Church* is made up of all born-again believers of all nations, tribes, tongues, generations, and eras.

What is a local church? The *local church* is a community of born-again believers, living within accessible proximity, striving to live in obedience to God’s Word in every area of their lives with the ultimate purpose of glorifying God.

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The following functions are what I taught the students at the Bible Institute. They were always challenged to explore the Scriptures and expand or modify this list if they found compelling hermeneutical reasoning to do so. I do not consider this a definitive list of the functions of the Church, but I am very comfortable with it as a foundation for a serious study on the functions of the Church.

- 1. Evangelism:** Believers in every local church should have a keen focus on discovering and implementing culturally appropriate ways to share the Good News with unbelievers in their communities in a way people can understand and respond appropriately (an informed response of *yes, no, or I want/need more time for reflection*) (Matthew 24:14; Luke 19:10; John 17:18; Acts 2:8-11; Acts 4:12).
- 2. Edification:** Believers in every local church should understand their corporate responsibility to use their God-given gifts to mutually edify and build one another up to do the work of the ministry. Interdependence is a concept built into the Body of Christ and finds its visible manifestation in the local church (Acts 2:42; Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:11-13; 2 Peter 3:18).
- 3. Worship:** A primary reason for the gathering of local believers is for creative and corporate expressions of adoration and exaltation of God (Psalm 29:2; 95:6; 100:2; 132:7; Jeremiah 32:39-40; John 4:24; Hebrews 12:28; Revelation 4:11).
True worship should be marked by 3 elements:
 - [a] Focused on God (Matthew 15:8; Revelation 4:8-11)
 - [b] Carried out in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24)
 - [c] Done in an orderly manner, which to a great degree is culturally determined (1 Corinthians 14:26-40)
- 4. Fellowship:** Since its inception, the local church has been the foundation for thriving communities of faith where individuals find unconditional love, acceptance, and interaction both spiritually and relationally. This is the Family of God, manifest on a local and visible level, to address both the spiritual and social needs of people (Acts 2:42; John 13:35; Hebrews 10:24-25).
- 5. Stewardship:** God has charged local fellowships of believers to use their common resources (people, gifts, influence, possessions, money) sacrificially and strategically for the maximum benefit of the community of believers and the world around them (Malachi 3:10; Matthew 6:19-21; Acts 20:35; 2 Corinthians 8-9).
- 6. Leadership:** God has gifted certain individuals within the local body to exercise spiritual leadership. Other local believers must recognize leadership gifting in others and the impact of their influence in leading with godly character, and look to them for vision and direction in the church. Regardless of the form this leadership takes (pastor, elders, leadership council), it is essential for some believers to accept and assume this responsibility within the local body for the church to thrive and grow.

Within the local body of believers, God will equip some members with the gifts of administration and organization to help the body be strategic in using its God-given resources. These members may include the leadership, but they also may be different members (Acts 1-2; 6; 13; Acts 6:1-7; Romans 12; Ephesians 4; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 3).

- 7. Ordinances:** An *ordinance* is a Christian practice associated with tangible elements (water, bread, juice) and celebrated by the church of Jesus Christ. The term is closely associated with the word *sacrament*, an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.

One of the purposes for the local gathering of believers is the regular observance of these ordinances instituted by Christ. These practices have been part of the local church since its inception (Matthew 28:19; John 13:1-17; Luke 22:7-22; Acts 2:37-41; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34).

8. Discipline: Jesus instructed His followers to follow the Kingdom way when dealing with interpersonal conflicts and sin within the local community of believers. From the church's inception, local assemblies practiced corrective discipline by following these principles and taking action when fellow Christians fell into sin. The ultimate goal of healthy church discipline is the complete restoration of believers (Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 5; Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5).

9. Benevolence: Healthy local congregations look outside themselves to actively identify the needs of people in their communities, work to alleviate pain and suffering, and bring hope and healing as their means allow. Jesus made it clear the unbelieving world would identify Christians as His children by expressions of selfless love or mercy shown toward others by their acts of benevolence.

Jesus said He didn't come to the earth to be served, but to serve. These words summarize the highest calling for all believers: *humble Christian service in and through the local church* (Matthew 20:28; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Corinthians 8, 9; Galatians 5:13; 2 Timothy 5:13-16; 1 Peter 4:10; 5:2).

10. Missional: Truly missional communities of believers are infused with God's overarching view of human history to reach a lost world outside the touch of a clear and personal gospel presentation. They do this by working to reproduce other like-minded communities of faith around the world, giving special emphasis to peoples among whom no viable Christian witness or church exists. They tailor everything they say and do—both inside their meetings and outside their meetings—to reflect this viewpoint (Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8).

About the Writer: A missionary to Ivory Coast and France for more than 30 years, Clint Morgan has served as general director of IM, Inc. since 2012. Learn more: fwbgo.com.



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