

## The life of the Early Church Session 1



### Devoted to teaching, worship and prayer (Acts 2:42,47; 4:23-31)

#### ENGAGE - activities to set the scene

- **How much time?** (*You will need paper and pens and copies of Attachment 1*)

Distribute paper and pens to people (or select a couple of volunteers).

You may wish to start the activity by sharing some of the information in the link [Surprising facts about how we spend our time.](#)

Ask them to write down the number of minutes/hours they spend in an average day on different activities such as: sleeping, eating, 'screen time' (tv, phones etc), entertainment, work, study, prayer and Bible reading, worship, fellowship etc.

- **Does it fit?** (*You will need a wide, tall, clear jar or vase, a handful of fruits, a kg of a substance such as rice, dried beans or small beads*)

Explain that our time is like the jar. Pour the chosen substance in the jar first. As you do so, say that the chosen substance is like the things that are perhaps not the most important in our lives (ask people to share what some of these may be). Then place the fruits on top. These represent the things that do deserve our attention (once again, ask people to share what these may be). Notice that they do not have their rightful place within the jar.

Take everything out of the jar and start again, this time placing the fruits in first and the substance afterwards - it should fit around the fruits.

- **What does this mean?**

At the end of either one of the activities, ask people to reflect individually, or share with someone answers to the following:

- Do any of the results surprise you?
- Do they encourage you or discourage you?
- How do you choose what you spend your time and energy on?



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### PRAY - prayer activities for different contexts

- *Lectio Divina* is an ancient way of prayerfully and worshipfully engaging with God through Scripture. It involves reading through a short passage multiple times and taking time for contemplation and response. (This can be done individually or with the opportunity to share with others after each reading.)
  - Ask someone to slowly read out **Psalm 1** while everyone else closes their eyes. Simply listen to the words and become familiar with this short passage. What is the general theme of the Psalm?
  - Have someone else read it out again, slowly. Ask everyone to listen carefully for any particular words or phrases that jump out to them. Don't analyse, just pay attention. Is there anything in the passage that is unclear?
  - Ask someone else to read it out again, slowly. This time pay careful attention to what the Lord might be asking of you or saying to you, through this passage. It might be related to what you noticed before, it might not. Does it sound like what you know of the Lord?
  - Ask someone else to read out the passage again, slowly. As they read, consider what your response might be to what the Lord is saying to you. Is he asking you a question? What is your answer? Is he telling you something, or asking you to do something? What do you say back?
  - Read it out one final time. Is there a conversion of the heart or the mind, or an action that this passage is leading us towards? Thank the Lord for his word.
- Consider running a day, weekend or week of 24-7 prayer. Having a devoted prayer season and space can help refocus our attention on the things that we say are most meaningful to us. Prayer rooms are great for creating time and space for worship, prayer and the reading of Scripture. You can find tips and tools for setting up a prayer room here: <https://www.24-7prayer.com/prayerrooms>
- Encourage people to download the app Inner Room, which turns one of our biggest distractions - our mobile phones - into a portable prayer tool. The app is a prayer list that helps people to pray daily: <https://innerroom.app/>



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### TEACH - content to help inform a sermon or small group outline

#### Introduction

**Acts 2:42-47** is well known as a model for what 'Church' ought to look like. There are two problems with this.

- First, few if any of us have experienced a church quite like the one described in Acts. Is this story prescriptive of how we should all be? If so, what has gone wrong? If not, what is the Church supposed to look like?
- Second, we don't pay enough attention to the context of this brand-new church in Acts. Its revolutionary gathering didn't spring up out of nowhere. It was a direct response to what some of its members had personally experienced alongside Jesus (his teaching, death, resurrection and ascension), and to the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit who had just exploded into the world and into their lives.

#### Context

- The first two chapters of Acts tell the story of a resurrected Jesus commissioning his disciples to be his witnesses all over the world, but first instructing them to wait for heavenly empowerment. So they pray together in an upper room in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit of God drops on them like a bomb, filling them to the brim with his presence and compelling them to burst out on to the streets with the message of the gospel on their lips and the words of different languages on their tongues (Acts 2:1-4).
- This charismatic display leads to the accusation that they are drunk (v13) - perhaps not an accusation ever levelled at your congregation after a church service! No, they are not drunk, explains Peter (v15), before launching into a fiery, pentecostal sermon (vv17-40). Salvation, Peter declares, means the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The result of this sermon is 3,000 people coming to faith in Jesus that day.

#### Exploration

It is these new, Spirit-filled disciples and converts who make up the fellowship of believers in Acts 2:42-47, and it is instructive to note what they got up to right away.

##### **Devoted**

- They 'devoted themselves' to certain things, not the least of which are the teaching of the apostles, prayer and worshipping God. These were not simply programme activities. They were elements of their personal and communal lives that permeated everything that they did, every day.



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### **Fruit**

- This permeation bore much fruit. It is worth figuring out what 'bearing fruit' means, though. Often in our church we think bearing fruit means winning converts, and that did happen in the Early Church as we see in the latter half of verse 47. But this is not the only, or even primary, fruit that is to be born.
- The point of being devoted to teaching, prayer and worship is not just to help with evangelism or Church growth. The point is to become more and more like Jesus, more united with his love and more dedicated to his purpose in the world (see John 15:1-17). In Galatians 5:22-23 the fruit of the Spirit is not defined as a bigger Church, but as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, all of which describe Christlikeness.
- The more we attend to the teaching of the apostles, the more we participate with the Lord in prayer, the more we declare our love and awe for God in worship, the closer and more deeply we are joined to the life of Jesus. This is our created meaning and purpose. Jesus is the vine, and we bear fruit as we - the branches - are united with the source of all life and goodness.

### **Life**

- These new believers, fresh-filled with the Spirit, wanted nothing more than to hear about Jesus from the people who spent years with him. They longed to connect with Jesus through prayer. They wanted to express their delight and gratitude to God in worship. All of this was a natural as breathing, because it was the fulfilment of the desire of their hearts.
- This is especially evident as we delve into the story of Peter and John's arrest (Acts 4:1-3). They were arrested because through them the Spirit healed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate (chapter 3), and they used the opportunity to speak to the crowd about Jesus. Threatened with imprisonment and beating, the disciples refused to be quiet about what they had seen.
- This is the fruit of discipleship, this confidence in the salvation of Christ and this perseverance in the face of persecution. Once released, they returned to the fellowship of believers to worship God, apply Scripture and pray. And once again the room shook and the believers were filled with the Spirit (Acts 4:23-31).

### **Conclusion**

- We are not the Early Church in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. Much history has passed since that time, and there is a temptation to think that was something God was doing then, but he is not doing it now.



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- Yet the call on our lives remains the same: attending to the teaching of the apostles as we find it in the Gospels and the Letters of the New Testament; devoting ourselves to intentional, personal and corporate prayer where we listen to God and make our requests and gratitude known; worshipping the Lord in spirit and in truth.
- These things still draw us into deeper relationship with God and still produce the fruit of Christlikeness in the people of God.
- The Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, the Spirit that fell upon the first fellowship of believers, is the same Spirit who fills us and empowers us today.

### REFLECT - questions for discussion/small groups

Describe your corps/church to one another. (Be honest and kind.)

- What are the major 'activities' of your corps/church?
- What do you really pay attention to as a fellowship?
- In other words, to what is your corps/church truly devoted?
- Why? What is the reason for this devotion?

Read out **Acts 2:42-47** together.

- What was this Early Church devoted to?

Read out verses **42** and **47a** again.

- What specifically are the apostle devoted to, according to these two verses?
- Why do you think these things mattered to them so much?
- Why are teaching, prayer and worship essential in our walk with God?
- How do they (or should they) lead us towards a deeper union with Jesus?
- How does your corps/church devote itself to teaching, prayer and worship?
- How do you do it personally?
- Do you see much fruit from this devotion? Why or why not?
- What kind of fruit should we expect to see? (see John 15:1-17; Galatians 5:22-23)

Read out **Acts 4:23-31**, a story which takes place just after Peter and John are arrested and then released for preaching the gospel.

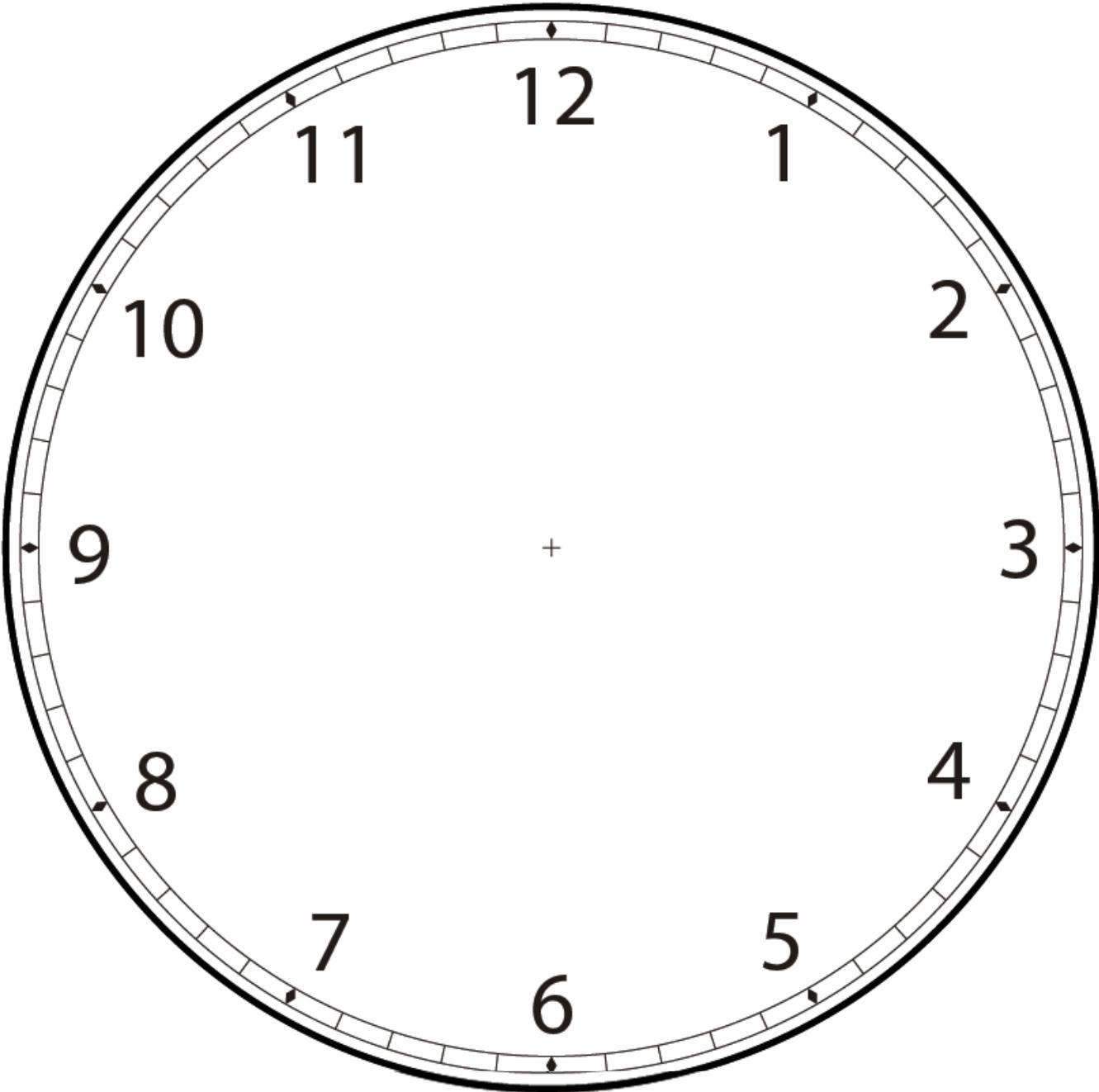
- How is the fruit of teaching, prayer and worship evident in this story?
- Have you ever experienced anything like that?
- Do you see teaching, prayer and worship as religious activities, or as things that permeate everything we do?
- How can we grow together in our longing to meet God in his word; our desire to be united with God in prayer; and our eagerness to encounter God in worship?



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ATTACHMENT 1



Vision and Commitment 2019  
A year to focus on effectiveness