

**Church Structures**

**Teacher Background**

**What is Church?**

The word Church often refers to the physical building in which Christians met for worship. This notion of Church derives its meaning from the Greek adjective *kuriakos* meaning *belonging to the Lord*. Its fuller derivative would have come from the Greek word *kuriakon doma* which translated means *the Lord’s house*. However, the word used in the scriptures is *ekklesia* which translated from the Greek word means *an official assembly of people*. The primary reference of *ekklesia* as an assembly of worship is in the New Testament (1 Cor 11:18, 14:19-35) and the use of the word is extended to refer to the community of the faithful in any give place. *Church* could therefore be defined as a community of Christians established in a particular locality and accustomed to meet regularly together for worship. This definition of the word *Church* will be the focus of this model.

However, the physical structure of Church buildings will be considered in one activity titled, *Designs of Churches* under the module organiser *Cultural Influences of Structures*. The assessment item provided on p. 5 also refers to *church* as a building for worship, not the broader definition of *Church* as an official assembly of people.

Jesus worshipped in a Jewish religious assembly of people. As a Jew the sacred place of his worship occurred in synagogues and Temples. Jesus was a devout Jew and in his time he called for Israel to renew its faithfulness to God, through a new covenant with God. He preached of the kingdom of God and a new law he outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. It soon became apparent that not all of Israel accepted his call for renewal. After his death the disciples of Jesus became isolated and disconnected. However, imbued with Resurrection faith, they soon formed their own small religious assemblies. They were communities of faith that responded to Jesus’ teachings and the needs of the community members. They gathered in households and other larger community assemblies in towns and cities. These *Churches*, as they became known, were united in faith, worship and leadership.

As Christianity expanded beyond Israel it became more strategic and institutionalised. The institutionalisation of Christianity and its Churches ensured the success of its apostolic mission and survival. There are many ways of being Church. One way to look at the different ways of being Church is to consider some categories or models of Church. These models or ways of looking at Church include: Church as institution, Church as community, Church as sacrament, Church as mission or proclaimer, Church as servant. Every Christian Church would incorporate at least some aspects of each of these concepts. However, many Churches focus on a particular way of being at particular times because of their history, culture and context.

Another concept or way of being Church is that of being Church as a Pilgrim People. This suggests the gathered assembly is in a process of journey of faith. It also suggests the evolving nature of Church. It also promotes an individual’s and a community’s journey towards the reign of God. Many Christian Churches also focus on their advocacy for peace and justice. This area of Church activity is faithful to the example of Jesus’ care for the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. When, on occasions, the Church has been silent or sided with the oppressor for whatever dubious benefit, the Church has failed to witness to Christ.

**Church as Institution**

Frequently the Church is seen as institution. However, it is not strictly accurate to call the church an institution. In reality, the Church, like a nation or a state, is a social entity, which contains many institutions within it and is organised and structured according to those institutions. Therefore one could more accurately say that the church is an observable social reality, which, by its nature, is structurally organised. The organisation and structure of and within Church institutions enables it to carry on its mission. The basic unit of organisation the Roman Catholic Church is the local Church or diocese, entrusted to the care of the Bishop. Each diocese administers a wide range of services to the Catholic and local community. For example, in the Archdiocese of Brisbane, the Archdiocesan
organisation is divided into four Vicariates. These include: Archdiocesan Services, Brisbane Catholic Education, Centacare and Church Life and Mission.

One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church
The Nicene Creed has a different section for each person of the Trinity – God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In the Creed, the statement “We believe in One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”, is a subsection of the credal section on the Holy Spirit. The Church is part of the action of the Holy Spirit and the Church is not complete or self-contained.

It is the Holy Spirit’s presence within the Church that brings Christ to the world. The Church can be described as an open circle of constant renewal by the Holy Spirit. The Church is Trinitarian in nature and therefore accepts diversity within its unity. The Church must have a futures perspective while remaining faithful to the past. Therefore the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church can be identified as follows:

One
The Church’s oneness is a Trinitarian concept of oneness. Its oneness reflects the nature of the Church’s founder. It does not mean conformity but rather a communion of Churches. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states “From the beginning, this one Church has been marked by a great diversity which comes from both the variety of God’s gifts and the diversity of those that receive them. Within the unity of the people of God, a multiplicity of peoples and cultures is gathered together. Among the Church’s members, there are different gifts, offices, conditions and ways of life. Holding a rightful place in the communion of the Church there are also particular Churches that retain their own traditions. Unity is of the essence the Church. The great richness of such diversity is not opposed to the Church’s unity.” (814)

As Christians, we are called to maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit in the bond of peace.

Holy
The concept of holiness does not suggest that the Church’s members collectively or individually are sinless people. Rather the Church, as an expression of God’s love, is holy because God’s love is holy. God’s covenant is not a contract broken by sin, it is unconditional. Just as Jesus showed his holiness by living in the world and including sinners and outcasts, so the Church is holy through its promise of mercy and forgiveness.

Catholic
The word catholic comes from the Greek meaning ‘all inclusive’, ‘open to the whole’. So in claiming belief in the catholic Church, as stated in the Creed, believers accept the universality and inclusivity of the Church. This means that the Church is open to all peoples and cultures and times. True catholicity in the world is an ideal or goal still to be realised. The Church community is in a process of evolving.

The word catholic was and is also applied to the teaching and the faith of the church and, in this sense, it means what is believed by the whole Church. It is universally united in its worship, in what it teaches. Finally, the word ‘Catholic’ has also come to be used to described individual Christians who profess belief in the Church’s universal teachings and practices.

Apostolic
The word ‘Apostle’ comes from the Greek, suggesting that an apostle is to be ‘sent’ as a bearer of good news. The Church is apostolic, commissioned to carry on what was begun by Christ. The challenge of being an apostolic Church is its call to send believers into times and situations that are as threatening as those faced by apostles in the past. An apostolic Church can never rest, it is continually challenged to witness and bear the good news into places and situations it may fear to go.

Ecumenism
Ecumenism and the ecumenical movement indicates the initiative and activities on the part of Christian Churches that are encouraged and organised to promote Christian unity. The Catholic
Church is committed to the ecumenical movement in three clear elements. These include: spiritual renewal, theological dialogue towards restoration of full communion and common mission and witness in the world. Evidence of internal spiritual renewal since Vatican II that brings Roman Catholics closer to their brothers and sisters in non-Catholic communion include: Renewal of the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, reception of insights of biblical witness of worship from the Reformation Churches in renewed Roman Catholic understanding of the relationship of Church and society. This renewal has enhanced opportunities for ecumenical co-operation between Churches to promote areas of social ethics and mission to the world. There is also evidence of a more nuanced approach to reconciliation. Ecumenical theological dialogue towards the restoration of full communion involves the underpinning principle that reunion will not be gained by compromise but a genuine common biblical and historical study to find a ground of truth which transcends the historic division/s. It depends on the power of the Holy Spirit working within the Ecumenical movement and those involved in the study of scripture and the past, towards restoration. Many notable dialogues have occurred since the early '60’s. The Roman Catholic Church has been engaged in the Faith and Order dialogue of the World Council of Churches since 1963. Dialogues have occurred with Lutheran, Uniting Church, Methodist, Presbyterian/Reformed, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Disciples of Christ and Anglicans. Baptist, Pentecostal and Evangelical dialogue on Mission have also occurred. The third area of focus for the Roman Catholic Church in the ecumenical movement is through its common mission and witness. The Roman Catholic Church promotes evangelisation and peace and justice at the local, national and global level and is a member of twenty-seven nation councils of Churches in the world.

**Leadership**

Leadership structures within Churches are diverse. Some use a centralised model with a hierarchical approach and others use a more decentralised model with approaches that encourage a shared leadership. The majority of Churches use a combination of elements of the centralised and decentralised models of leadership. In some Churches only males have leadership roles whilst in others, females and males have leadership roles.

The Roman Catholic Church has a hierarchical and patriarchal model of Church leadership and authority. Hierarchy has to do with ‘sacred rule’ or the governance of the Church. Each local Roman Catholic Church diocese is entrusted to the pastoral leadership of a Bishop, who is assisted by presbyters and deacons. These comprise the ordained or sacramental ministry. The Pope, in union with all the bishops, has pastoral responsibility for the universal Church.

Within the life of the Roman Catholic Church, some are called to serve in particular roles of leadership. The sacrament of Holy Orders consecrates bishops, priests and deacons to serve the people of God. The bishop is entrusted with a threefold ministry of teaching, sanctifying and governing a local Church in communion with the Church universal. The priest is a co-worker with the bishop and usually serves a community known as a parish. The deacon, who has a more limited liturgical role, assists in the practical works of charity the local Church undertakes.

All baptised persons share in the priesthood of Jesus. In daily life they seek to bring about God’s reign and to be instruments of grace to all they meet. Those called to Orders share in a special way in Jesus’ priesthood. In the Latin (Roman) tradition of the Church, only males who undertake a celibate lifestyle are ordained. Since Vatican II one of the three ordained orders, the diaconate, has been made available to married males. Soon after Vatican II many dioceses in the United States ordained married deacons. In more recent times in Australia male, married deacons have been ordained as permanent deacons in some dioceses in Australia. Some of the roles of deacons include; preaching, baptising and presiding at funerals. There are now also some married, former Anglican priests ordained as priests in the Roman Catholic tradition.