Church is part of the Ministry Philosophy Series created by Compassion International. Compassion’s Ministry Philosophy Series offers a solid foundation of understanding for our approach to ministry. The series is intended primarily for Compassion’s worldwide leadership. However, these works are also offered to the public with the hope that others involved in the fight against poverty, and those who work for the protection and development of children, might find these resources helpful and rich in insight.

Compassion believes that the church is the great hope for the world and is God’s instrument to advance His kingdom. We mobilize and connect the global Body of Christ to fulfill her mandate for holistic discipleship of children in poverty.

This document describes Compassion’s understanding of the church and the implications of our commitment to the church. We also explore uses for the word “church,” including some modern-day perceptions and a historical review of the word’s biblical uses. The English word “church” originated from the Greek term ecclesia, which was used in the ancient secular world to refer to “a gathering of people” or “an assembly.” This document describes Compassion’s understanding of Jesus’ intent for His ecclesia — a dynamic local community of disciple-making people empowered by the Holy Spirit.
CHURCH
COMPASSION’S MINISTRY PHILOSOPHY SERIES

Releasing children from poverty
in Jesus’ name
Contents

Acknowledgments 5
Introduction 7

Part 1  Defining the Church 11

Part 2  Biblical Foundations for the Church — the Ecclesia 19
  1. The Ecclesia of Jesus Christ 19
  2. The Acts 2 Church 22
  3. The Great Commission: Given to the Church 23
  4. The Mission of the Church: Making Disciples 25
  5. The Unstoppable Force 32

Part 3  The Church — the Hope of the World 37

Part 4  Synopsis 45
  The Church Is ...
  1. Primarily the Local, Rather Than the Universal, Body of Believers 45
  2. A Way of Life, not a Weekly Event 46
  3. An Organism, not an Organization 46
  4. A Community, not an Institution 48
  5. The Living Stones, not the Buildings 48
  6. Makes Disciples, not Programs 49
  7. The Hope for the World, not Focused on Itself 49

Part 5  Compassion’s Commitment to the Church 51

Epilogue: Compassion’s Prayer for the Local Church 55
About Compassion International 57
Acknowledgments

The Global Executive Leadership Team of Compassion International is proud to present Compassion’s Ministry Philosophy of the Church. This work is born from deep appreciation for the thousands of local churches with whom we partner around the world — those who implement holistic child development programs and those who raise up congregations of passionate Christ followers dedicated to fulfilling Jesus’ mandate to care for the poor.

We are also deeply grateful to the Compassion staff members who led the effort of articulating this philosophy on behalf of our global organization: Dr. Bambang Budijanto, Wolfgang Riedner, Herb Ehresman, Dr. Scott Todd and David Dahlin.

Compassion’s Ministry Philosophy Series offers a solid foundation of understanding for our approach to ministry. The series is intended primarily for Compassion’s worldwide leadership. However, these works are also offered to the public, with the hope that others involved in the fight against poverty and those who work for the protection and development of children might find these resources helpful and rich in insight.
Introduction

For many years, Compassion International has professed a strong commitment to the church. This has been a principal differentiator between Compassion and other not-for-profit (nongovernmental) organizations in both our program models and our brand positioning. Yet many other organizations also claim a commitment to the church. Given the importance of this distinctive for Compassion, it is critical to define both our understanding of the church and the implications of our commitment to the church. That is the goal of this Ministry Philosophy document.

The word “church” is commonly used to mean both a local congregation and the universal body of believers. Many Christian organizations and publishers traditionally use “church” to signify the local congregation and “Church” when referring to the worldwide or transcendent Body of Christ. For reasons of simplicity and readability, and to reinforce the main point of this document, we have chosen to use the lowercase “c” in reference to either entity. We make an exception for quotations from outside sources.

In this book we provide Compassion’s understanding of the key concepts of the Christian church and the practical implications of that understanding. Jesus presented the church primarily as a dynamic kingdom community, an unstoppable spiritual force on earth, and an eschatological agent of transformation. He elevated the meaning of the New Testament word for “church,” ecclesia, from merely an assembly or an event to a dynamic community of disciple-making people empowered by the Holy Spirit.

1 Matthew 16:18
We will also discuss the distinct roles of the church and “parachurch” organizations. These concepts become easily confused. However, Compassion believes that these roles need to be clear and distinct. Further, we make the case that as a parachurch organization committed to the church, the only practical expression of that commitment must be made with “the local body of believers that would be recognized by the community as an organized center of worship and outreach.”

Finally, Compassion recognizes that the effectiveness of our ministry to children in poverty is dependent upon our local church partners. They are the ones who directly minister to the children whom we so deeply care about. It is our honor and privilege to join hands with local churches around the world to release children from poverty in Jesus’ name.

---

2 Compassion International Policy I-5-1, “Definition of the Local Church.”
Five hundred years ago, Martin Luther said, “For, thank God, a child seven years old knows what the Church is.” In modern times, the situation is quite different. What may have seemed obvious and self-evident to Martin Luther seems to have become confused.

In today’s world, the term “church” may be claimed by emergent churches, Chinese house churches, or even so-called TV or Internet churches. It is not uncommon to hear references to Matthew 18:20 (“For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”) as a criterion — perhaps the sole criterion — for qualifying as a church. On the other end of the spectrum one finds the massive organizational hierarchies of the major denominations — with sophisticated ecclesiology, authority structures, and creedal commitments — also defined as the church. And certainly we are all familiar with the use of the same term to reference the universal Body of Christ that extends globally and throughout the course of history.

The rise of what we term “parachurch” organizations has added additional complexity to understanding “church.” The distinction between church and parachurch raises questions about what, exactly, defines the church. The very term “parachurch” implies distinction from the church itself and suggests an organization that is alongside (para) the church. As author Howard Snyder puts it, “Parachurch structures are not the essence of the church.” When Compassion talks about partnership with the church, we certainly keep in mind that those who work for Compassion are members of their respective churches. In fact, Compassion’s Leadership Principles call our staff to “commit to a local church” and our leaders remind us that Compassion is not a church. Many parachurch organizations claim a commitment to the church, but what exactly does that mean? If by “church” they refer only to the global body of believers, and assuming they count themselves to be part of that global body, then they are in fact saying that they are committed to themselves! This becomes somewhat meaningless. To be committed to the church must imply some form of service to the local body of believers.

Further confounding matters, many churches with denominational structures have developed specialized organizations that provide services ranging from publishing to health care to poverty alleviation. The rise of today’s nondenominational megachurch movement is following a similar path of organizational development and differentiation. Many local churches today sell books and coffee, facilitate foreign mission experiences, run schools, and offer many other specialized services. The staffing, management and financial activity necessary for such services is often indistinguishable from a parachurch organization or, for that matter, a Christian-run business.

Debate around the definition of a church typically occurs along two dimensions. The first dimension is the “bounded-ness” of a church. Boundaries such as culture and geography lead to questions such as “Is the church, by definition, local?” The second dimension is the governance and function of a church, which leads to questions such as “If two believers get together, is that a church?” And even more broadly, “When believers gather, what should they practice in order to be considered a church?”

Certainly the visible form of the local congregation has varied significantly throughout history and continues to have diverse and vibrant expressions ranging from megachurch to home church, from gothic spires to underground meetings. These communities of believers transcend culture, political systems, technologies and social structures, but they are also shaped by them.

In spite of that variation of form, major ecclesiastical bodies have a somewhat consistent view of the substance of what church actually is. Roman Catholic theology gives an encompassing definition of the word “church,” designating it as:

the liturgical assembly but also the local community or the whole universal community of believers. These three meanings are inseparable. “The Church” is the People that God gathers in the whole world. She exists in local communities and is made

---

2 Howard A. Snyder, The Community of the King, Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press (2004), 185.
real as a liturgical, above all a Eucharistic, assembly. She draws her life from the word and the Body of Christ and so herself becomes Christ’s Body.3

This teaching sees the church as a global body of believers made real in local communities.

The Orthodox Church makes clear statements that each individual church exists distinct from the whole, and yet they all have “exactly the same doctrine, discipline and spiritual practices.”4 When aggregated, their collective identity is the “Orthodox Church” even though they remain locally autonomous. Here, governance includes universal doctrines and practices but retains local government and organization.

Protestantism — itself a diverse body of faith expressions — is more difficult to characterize. Historical confessions express the universal nature of the church consisting of “the whole number of the elect.”5 More recent confessions and bylaws continue this theme, with statements such as “The Church is a people created by God in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, called and sent to bear witness,”6 while also beginning to localize that idea similar to Catholic theology:

The Church exists both as an inclusive fellowship and as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service. Congregations find their fulfillment in the universal community of the Church, and the universal Church exists in and through congregations.7

In other cases, Protestant thought has produced broader definitions of “church.” The Lausanne Covenant 1974, “The Church and Evangelism,” states that “the church is the community of God’s people rather than an institution.”8 Others temper this view with statements such as “The church is not merely an institution or organisation [sic], but communities of Jesus that embody the values of the kingdom.”9

In addition to historical denominations, a significant number of believers belong to what some have called the “contemporary church” — encompassing everything from nondenominational congregations to unregistered home churches in China to storefront charismatic assemblies. What these believers share is belonging to a local body that has relatively little formal doctrinal documentation, external ecclesiastical structure, or denominational ties. These groups of believers typically lack formal government or ecclesiastical relationships beyond the boundaries of their specific gathering. They also often exhibit a strong group identity, seeing themselves as Christ’s church, yet they still have a keen awareness of being part of a broader movement in the work of God in the world.

3 Catechism of the Catholic Church, #752, www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p123a9p1.htm.
4 Orthodox Church in America, Questions and Answers About Orthodoxy, “How is the Orthodox Church organized and held together as one worldwide Church?” www.oca.org/QAPrintable.asp?ID=15.
7 ELCA, Provision 3.02.
Protestant ecclesiology has developed many terms to describe the complex nature of the church. The graph below represents some of these terms:

The various understandings of the term “church” are congruent with Compassion’s experience in the countries where we serve. We see significant variation in form and governance, but there is a generally consistent vision among our partners who view themselves as both local churches and as part of a worldwide communion and movement. **We affirm the view that the Scriptures and Christian teaching define the church as local congregations gathered for worship and Christian service, the various structures and fellowships of congregations, and the universal Body of Christ that spans space and time. However, the metaphysical nature of the universal church becomes meaningless without the personal and tangible expression of the local church. The global Body of Christ is made real in local communities.**
1. The *Ecclesia* of Jesus Christ

In the English Bible, the word that we read as “church” is generally a translation of the Greek word *ecclesia*. In pre-New Testament usage, *ecclesia* referred to a call or summons for the army to assemble.¹ Later in its development, the word was used to denote popular or general assembly for a civic purpose, or a socio-political gathering specifically in Athens. Overall, the word as it was used in the ancient secular world conveyed the meaning of a gathering of people, an assembly, or an event where people gathered together in one place for socio-political purposes.

The word *ecclesia* occurs 114 times in the New Testament, and there are three basic ways in which it is used. Its primary usage refers to an assembly of the people of God. This is similar to the way the word was used in the secular world at that time. The author of Acts uses it three times to refer to social or civic gatherings of people in general.² This use

² Acts 19:32, 39, 41
of the word *ecclesia* points to its geographical boundedness of people gathering in one place at one time and gives strength to the primary understanding of our modern translation of “church” as a gathering in a location.

The second major use of *ecclesia* in the New Testament refers to the actual community of the believers — a congregation, a community of God’s people. Paul writes “to the church [ecclesia] of God in Corinth,” and “to the church [ecclesia] of the Thessalonians.” Here the reference goes beyond simply a gathering to an ongoing community of God’s people. It is implied that this gathering of God’s people has an identity as a community, that they see themselves as a group.

The third use of the word *ecclesia* is allegorical and spiritual. An example of this usage can be seen in Colossians 1:18, where the human body is used as an illustration of the *ecclesia*. This metaphorical usage of the term *ecclesia* is similar to how many Christians have traditionally referred to the uppercase Church as the universal body of believers, the Body of Christ, the People of God.

Jesus’ own words are translated into the Greek *ecclesia* only three times, and every occurrence is in Matthew’s gospel. In these cases Jesus was referring to the future — when His church (the *ecclesia*) would be established. Apart from this futuristic usage by Jesus, the first other usage of *ecclesia* in the New Testament appears in Acts 5, referring specifically to the congregation in Jerusalem. Luke uses the term 23 times in the book of Acts, each referring to a specific assembly or congregation with certain geographical locations. While Luke uses the word many times in the book of Acts, he does not use it at all in his gospel, which may suggest that he and the other evangelists (Matthew, Mark and John) perhaps consciously avoided using the word *ecclesia* for any group of disciples or believers during the period of Jesus’ earthly activity.

Considering the New Testament usage of the word *ecclesia* as described above, it seems that the turning point that transformed Jesus’ followers (disciples) into the church, the *ecclesia* of Jesus Christ, was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2. That is why the day of Pentecost was considered to be the birth of the church. In predicting the time when the *ecclesia* would be born, Jesus foretold of a new community, fueled by divine power:

> “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”
> — Acts 1:8

While *ecclesia* was a Greek word commonly used prior to and during Jesus’ time, Jesus did not confine His idea of *ecclesia* to the Roman-Greco socio-political usage of the term. Jesus gave a fresh connotation to the word — a usage that was developed further by Luke and Paul. Instead of an event or gathering, Jesus presented the *ecclesia* as a dynamic kingdom “community,” an unstoppable spiritual force on earth, and an eschatological agent of transformation.

---

1 1 Corinthians 1:2
2 1 Thessalonians 1:1
3 See also Ephesians 1:22 and Colossians 1:24
4 Matthew 16:18; 18:17
5 Matthew 16:18
Today this understanding of a dynamic kingdom community is widely accepted. For example, leading New Testament scholar N.T. Wright states, “The church is first and foremost a community, a collection of people who belong to one another because they belong to God.”

What turned this new kingdom community from just a gathering into the dynamic, unstoppable community? The power of the Holy Spirit began operating in and through the lives of every member of the ecclesia. This same group of people who had been fearful and weak (see John 20:19) suddenly emerged into a courageous and powerful community — the church.

2. The Acts 2 Church

The power of the Holy Spirit was not only significantly manifested at the birth of the church, but this was also continued in its daily operation. The church was not only birthed in power but it continued to operate in power. Luke made an extensive list of the changes that took place when the early followers of Jesus were empowered to become the church. Some examples include:

- The power of the Holy Spirit filled the new community with agape love, which in turn produced “courage.” The church became an uncompromisingly courageous community. They developed a high sense of calling and determination.
- Genuine love and deep care for each other were very visible in the way the individuals in the church committed themselves to engage in daily fellowship.
- They demonstrated extreme generosity. Their love informed their actions so that there were no needy people among them.
- The hearts and minds of the believers were united.
- Their testimony was confirmed with miraculous signs and wonders. People looked at the church with great respect, awe and amazement.
- From day one, the church was a dynamically growing community.

3. The Great Commission: Given to the Church

In the book of Acts, Luke summarizes how Jesus spent the last 40 days of His earthly ministry:

After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

— Acts 1:3

---

9 Acts 1:8; 2:2-4
10 Acts 1:8; 2:2-4
11 Acts 2:43; 3:12; 4:7, 30, 33; 5:12
12 Acts 2:36; 4:13, 31
13 Acts 5:29
14 Acts 2:42, 46
15 Acts 2:45; 4:34
16 Acts 4:32
17 Acts 2:7, 43; 3:10; 5:11
18 Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 6:1, 7
Quite consistently with the other evangelists, Luke outlines three main tasks that Jesus engaged in and accomplished during those 40 days, namely:

- proving to His disciples that He had indeed risen from the dead — the foundation of the new faith;
- helping His disciples understand the “big picture” — the kingdom of God; and
- entrusting to His disciples the Great Commission — the “mission of the church.”

Within those 40 days, probably toward the end, Jesus gave the Great Commission to His disciples. But He asked them to “wait in Jerusalem” (meaning, “Do not embark on the Great Commission yet”) until the Holy Spirit came upon them, which would mark the birth of the church. The same people who had been called the Twelve, the disciples, and the followers of Jesus were now — by the baptism of the Holy Spirit — called the church. They were no longer 12 or 120 individual followers of Jesus, but a dynamic kingdom community entrusted with the Great Commission.

4. The Mission of the Church: Making Disciples

The Great Commission embodies the mission of the church: to make disciples. The verb “make disciple” (matheteuo) occurs four times in the New Testament. Out of these four occurrences, only in Matthew 28:19 does the verb appear in the imperative or command form.

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in

Our churches should be equipping centers to prepare God’s people for service. It is our service to others that will strengthen the Body of Christ and create transformation and growth in each person’s life.”

19 The noun “disciple” (mathetes) is common in the Gospels and Acts, but does not appear in the rest of the New Testament. It appears 73 times in Matthew, 46 times in Mark, and 37 times in Luke. Mark and Luke used the noun to describe the Twelve, while Matthew used the word more widely; his usage included the Twelve, but not exclusively.

20 Acts 1:5

21 Matthew 13:52; 27:57; 28:19; Acts 14:21
the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”
— Matthew 28:18-20

The imperative verb “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19 defines the main action, the core command of the Great Commission. Matthew uses three participles alongside the imperative verb: poreuthentes (“going”), baptizontes (“baptizing”), and didaskontes (“teaching”). The participles “baptizing” and “teaching” outline how the mission of making disciples is to be carried out. Thus the command could read, “As you are baptizing people, make them disciples. As you are teaching people to obey all of My commands, make them My disciples.”

The first participle that accompanies the imperative “make disciples” (matheteusate) is “going” (poreuthentes). It sets the tone of the Great Commission. The verb poreuomai (“going”) occurs 154 times in the New Testament and conveys the meaning of traveling or journeying — both literally and figuratively (to die, to take a journey into the other world). Just as the notion of the church of Jesus Christ is that of a dynamic community and not an event, so the disciple-making process is a journey and not a single event or intervention. This journey of disciplemaking is the path that will lead people to grow into Christlikeness.

The second participle in the Great Commission text is baptizontes: “baptizing” them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Baptism marked the identification of a believer with Jesus’ death and resurrection. In the context of the journey of discipleship, such identification with Jesus brought with it a profound identification with the community of like-minded Christians. When one declared oneself to be a Jesus follower through baptism, one committed to being a disciple — and to making disciples — so each member of the community would become more like Christ.

The third participle is didaskontes: “teaching” them to obey or observe everything Jesus has taught them. The church was commissioned to make disciples by means of teaching (didasko). The word implies a broad approach to learning with a focus beyond intellectual gains. The objective of the disciple-making process is not to accumulate knowledge of all the teachings of Jesus. Rather, the intended outcome of discipleship is the demonstration, in thought and behavior, of the lordship of Christ. This is verified in the expected outcome of the disciple-making process, which is to enable disciples to obey

... far from Christ to closeness and, finally, to Christlikeness. It is a process of helping people move toward maturity, wholeness and becoming like Jesus.

The audience of the Great Commission or disciple-making process is ta ethnee — all nations, all peoples, all ethnic groups. Jesus did not limit the scope of disciplemaking to candidates within a church building. In fact, at the time of the Great Commission there were no church buildings, so the command assumes that disciplemaking takes place outside of church walls. Disciplemaking is a transformation process bringing

---

23 Ephesians 4:12-13
24 It is a prolonged (causative) form of a primary verb dao (to learn), to teach (in the same broad application). Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, Greek, 1321, www.strongsnumbers.com/greek/1321.htm.
and submit to the reign and lordship of Jesus Christ. Thus the goal of the Great Commission, and therefore of the disciple-making process, is the reign of Christ in individual life and its reflection in community.

A kingdom is that domain where the king's sovereignty is honored and his will is done. It has been said that the universe holds about 6 billion and one kingdoms — God's kingdom and the 6 billion tiny little kingdoms where God has granted a small (and temporary) exemption from His sovereignty. These are “ruled” by us individually in the form of our will. The kingdom of God advances every time one of us chooses to align our will with the will of the King — when His will is done in and through us. The visible evidence of His will — relationships characterized by love of God and of one another — can be considered a manifestation or “sign” of the reign of Christ.

Disciplemaking is aimed at creating a lifelong holistic learner committed to the lordship of Jesus Christ, powered by ongoing intentional holistic transformation into Christlikeness. Discipleship is a dynamic process and journey of holistic personal growth in, with and through the kingdom community (the church), which takes place within the context of, and for the purpose of, the advancement of God's reign (the lordship of Christ) in individual lives as well as in the broader community. The local church is the sign of the kingdom in that the reign of God is most vividly demonstrated in the lives of its members. As the character and mind of Christ are increasingly manifested in the life of each disciple, kingdom ethics govern the way each disciple relates to others and to the rest of the world in an increasing measure.\(^{25}\)

The church has only one mission: to make disciples. In the Great Commission Jesus did not command the church to “engage in making disciples and to care for the poor,” or to “make disciples and to care for creation,” or to “make disciples and to engage in the public square.” This is because making disciples includes all of those aspects. The ultimate goal of making disciples is the kingdom of God, which is the reign of God in individual lives and its reflection in families, communities and nations.

The disciple-making process is holistic in nature. Jesus did not commission the church to eradicate poverty; He did tell the church to make disciples. But through the disciple-making process, poverty should be eradicated as the kingdom of God is advanced.\(^{26}\)

Consider the words of Christopher Sugden in *Radical Discipleship*:

> Christian maturity covers the whole of our humanity. We often reduce Christian maturity to the “spiritual” activities of regular prayer and Bible reading, personal evangelism, Christian service and active concerns for missionary society. We neglect goals and motives in career and job, attitude to community and social issues, involvement with others in fellowship and sharing, the practice of hospitality and the care of the underprivileged.\(^{27}\)

> The good news of Jesus Christ is both proclaimed and demonstrated or it is nothing. It must encompass the whole person and the whole of

\(^{25}\) Philippians 2:1-9

\(^{26}\) Acts 4:34

humanity. The split of the gospel into spiritual concerns and social concerns is a false dichotomy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, wrote from his cell in the Flossenbürg concentration camp during World War II: “The church is only the church when it exists for others.”

We go even further by asserting that the church is only the church when it is a local, dynamic community of disciple-making believers. This definition captures a biblical sense of what the church is and what the church does.

An old African proverb says, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Similarly, it takes a church to make a true disciple of Christ. The Great Commission to make disciples was not given to individual Christians; it is the work of the Holy Spirit through the church. An individual Christian may be used by the Holy Spirit to lead a person to accept Jesus Christ as Savior, but it will take the church — the community of Christ, the family of God — to make a mature disciple. One Christian may be able to help another Christian grow in his or her spiritual journey, but an effective and holistic disciple-making process best occurs in the context of a community of disciples — a local church.

The leadership and structure of local churches should be designed to facilitate the continuous transformation of each member into a mature believer in the likeness of Christ.

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. — Ephesians 4:11-13

Our churches should be equipping centers to prepare God's people for service. It is our service to others that will strengthen the Body of Christ and create transformation and growth in each person's life. Without service, there is limited spiritual growth in both the individual believer and the community of believers. As Paul said in Ephesians, it is when the whole body is in service, each part doing its part, that the body is strengthened and built up.  

The dynamic community of the local church operates powerfully in advancing the kingdom of God every single day — seven days a week. Tragically, this non-stop transformation has, in many parts of the world, been reconfigured into a single event on Sundays, and looking on “church” primarily as a weekly event on Sundays returns the meaning of the word back to its ancient, secular usage as merely an event or gathering. Jesus had other ideas. Jesus called His church to be a dynamic, kingdom-building, disciple-making community.

The church is an unstoppable force — the mightiest force on earth, prevailing against hell itself. The church is God's Plan A for advancing His kingdom. And there is no Plan B. The church is a dynamic, progressive, transforming community for the advancement of the kingdom of God. The church is the agent God chooses, establishes and nurtures to accomplish His purpose in restoring His kingdom. It is the only entity established by Jesus Christ.

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church [ecclesia], and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” — Matthew 16:18-19

Jesus was the founder, the architect, and the one who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, constructed and established the church. Through His Holy Spirit, Jesus is also the one who continues to build, edify and embolden His church everywhere and throughout history. The advancement of life and of the kingdom of God implies the weakening and shrinkage of the kingdom of death and darkness. Thus the church, by its very nature, poses a serious threat to death (hades) and the kingdom of hell (sheol). Jesus promised that even the gates of hell would not be able to stop, let alone overcome, this dynamic spiritual community.

Jesus also indicated that the church would possess the keys of His kingdom, which would grant unlimited access to the throne of God. With this privilege, the church would operate in the authority and power of God. With the magnitude of the mission and the threat posed to the kingdom of hell, the church could not afford to operate solely within the human realm, relying only on human strength.

The church in Acts 2 set the standard for what it means to operate in the power of God. Inaugurated in Jerusalem, it spread rapidly and in less than 300 years

---

\[29 \text{Ephesians 4:16}\]
\[30 \text{Acts 2:46-47}\]
\[31 \text{John 10:10}\]
\[32 \text{Acts 2:43; 3:12; 4:7, 30, 33; 5:12}\]
transformed lives throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Now as then, the church is empowered by God to face extreme challenges and to prevail against intense opposition. Now as then, the church is meant to influence all aspects of life and all sectors of society. The church was founded upon the “rock,” the confession of Peter that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. This is our firm and unmovable foundation. This dynamic kingdom community is now, as it was at its formation, endowed with power, authority and guidance from God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Our understanding of the “end times” (eschatology) profoundly shapes our efforts to advance God’s kingdom. How we envision the end times might inspire us to work hard as participants in God’s work of redemption, the reconciliation of all things — or it might terrify us into a shell of endurance and waiting. God’s work through the church and the making of disciples brings us toward eschatological fulfillment and the consummation of all things.

The early church believed that they were at the beginning of the end times.33 (They were also aware of their capacity and expected role in contributing to hastening the day of God.34) The early church understood that role as being the agent of eschatological fulfillment:

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

“Hallelujah!
For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

33 Acts 2:17-21
34 2 Peter 3:12

Jesus also indicated that the church would possess the keys of His kingdom, which would grant unlimited access to the throne of God. With this privilege, the church would operate in the authority and power of God.”
Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.”
— Revelation 19:6-7

In a vision at Patmos, God revealed to the apostle John that at the consummation of time, in a glorious celebration of the wedding supper of the Lamb, two would remain standing — Christ and His Bride, the church.\(^{35}\) The church, that unstoppable force, is God’s Plan A for the restoration of humanity and the advancement of His kingdom. Christ was the creator and designer of His church; His redemptive work formed its foundation. He provided the church with unlimited access to the throne of God. Most importantly, He provided the Holy Spirit, who empowers, encourages, teaches and directs us to ensure that the church lives up to its call to be made ready and, at the end of the day, to stand as the glorious Bride at the wedding supper of Christ.\(^{36}\)

The transformational function of the church is not limited to its internal transformation. The Body of Christ does not exist for itself but as an agency of God’s work in the world. Leaders are to equip God’s people for works of service. The activities of the church fellowship must impact how the kingdom community lives out its call, reflecting the image of Christ in the midst of society.

Where does the church stand in the global fight against poverty, injustice, racial conflicts, diseases and other unresolved issues? Does the church have a role to play in resolving these worldwide problems? Did Jesus design the church to deal with these massive and apparently chronic global issues?

The church has a long and noble history of engaging in the social ills of society and being a force for redemptive good. The Acts 2 church was characterized by how they cared for the widow and the orphan. They were known as the people who had “no needy persons among them.”\(^{1}\)

\(^{35}\) See also Ephesians 5:32-33

\(^{36}\) Ephesians 5:25-27

\(^{1}\) Acts 4:34
The apostles appointed “a man full of God’s grace and power” who “did great wonders and miraculous signs” to lead the social outreach of the church. This was no second-rate mandate; it was central to the mission of the early church. In fact, so effective was the holistic ministry of the second-century church that the last pagan emperor of Rome, Julian, saw this as a huge threat to the religious system and power of Rome. Julian wrote,

“These impious Galileans (Christians) not only feed their own poor, but ours also; welcoming them into the agape, they attract them, as children are attracted, with cakes.... Whilst the pagan priests neglect the poor, the hated Galileans devote themselves to works of charity, and by a display of false compassion have established and given effect to their pernicious errors. See their love feasts, and their tables spread for the indigent. Such practice is common among them, and causes contempt for our gods.”

The church is commissioned to engage with the world and participate in the reconciliation of all things. To do this, the church has a simple strategy: the comprehensive (holistic) disciple-making process. Through holistic disciplemaking, people are linked to the ultimate source of power — the Creator himself, through Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Through holistic disciplemaking, the church is empowered to demonstrate the ultimate form of love: the agape — the sacrificial and unconditional love that heals and restores relationships. Through holistic disciplemaking, the poor and the oppressed are empowered to reach their potential in God and become salt and light for their communities and nations. When kingdom ethics govern the behavior of those engaged in holistic disciplemaking, people’s dignity is restored. This process impacts the broader community with healing and forgiveness.

As a divinely ordained entity empowered by agape love and equipped with heavenly authority, the church is God’s plan to bring reconciliation and healing to our ailing world. Bill Hybels, senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, sees the church as the hope of the world. He further claims that if the church cannot solve the issue of poverty and other global concerns, then no one else can. In our Core Values, Compassion states, “The Church is the great hope for the world and is God’s instrument to advance the kingdom of God. We mobilize and connect the global Body of Christ to fulfill her mandate for holistic discipleship of children in poverty.” This view of the church’s role and mandate reclaims the rightful place of the church at the center of God’s plan and thus of human history.

In his book Fast Living: How the Church Will End Extreme Poverty, Dr. Scott Todd writes: “There is one institution on earth with the capacity, the presence, the credibility, the endurance, and the passion to perform the ultimate act of caring for the poor. It is the Church, the body of Christ.”

Indeed, the local church is arguably the best vehicle for human and societal development. Those who have worked to alleviate poverty know the importance of working with and empowering local “grass-roots” communities to take the lead in transformational development. The church is the best and best-placed strategic servant of transformational ministry — as it encourages families not only to acknowledge but also to implement God’s design for love and care. Theologically and practically, the church is the best place for holistic development. It is the most tenacious community on the face of the earth. It has shown itself to be sustainable, having weathered every imaginable storm and yet continuing its community presence.

In fact, many in the development world see the church as the best agent to bring about societal transformation. Dr. Ed Green, a Harvard medical anthropologist, writes of East Africa,

Churches are found in nearly all communities in the region and wield a significant level of cultural, political, social, educational and economic influence. The Church can be viewed as the largest, most stable and most extensively dispersed nongovernmental organization in any country. Churches are respected within communities and most have existing resources, structures and systems upon which to build. They possess the human, physical, technical and financial resources needed to support and implement small- and large-scale initiatives. They can undertake these actions in a very cost-effective manner, due to their ability to leverage volunteer and other resources with minimal effort.

Compassion believes in the church because God believes in the church. It is His Plan A. And our experiences since 1952 have shown us what an effective plan it is. As transformative disciple-making communities, churches have reach around the world that is unparalleled by any other organization on the planet.

---

4 Compassion International, Core Values booklet, 5.
For example, contrast the worldwide Christian church with the world’s largest corporation:

The world’s largest corporation is China Petro-Chemical, which boasts a labor force of 1,190,000 employees. By comparison, the Church is at least a thousand times larger. The Church is the only organization with hundreds of millions of members and the capacity to mobilize hundreds of millions of volunteers. I’m not just talking about the good people serving in soup kitchens — I’m talking about deployment of agents into every sector of society. Agents aligned by one Spirit and a shared hope, drawing on immeasurable riches to achieve what cannot be done alone.\(^7\)

Compassion partners with local churches to jointly implement holistic child development programs. We recognize the unparalleled capacity of the church, the unparalleled reach of the church, and the unparalleled mandate of the church to advance against the gates of hell and to be authentic communities of transformation. Compassion recognizes that the ministry to children in poverty is first and foremost a ministry of the local church. Like effective ministries of any church anywhere in the world, child development ministry happens because of the passion, dedication and sacrifice of local church members.

\(^7\)Todd, *Fast Living*, 179.
1. The Church Is Primarily the Local, Rather Than the Universal, Body of Believers

Once a person becomes a Christian, he or she becomes a member of the universal Body of Christ. Christ unites each Christian with every other Christian in Spirit. And this universal membership in the Body of Christ is given concrete expression in the form of the local church. Ephesians 3:6 calls it a mystery that Gentiles and Jews are now members of one body, and that is only the beginning. The reconciliatory work of Christ goes much further, as Galatians 3:28 demonstrates: free men and slaves, men and women, rich and poor, all become part of this body as the visible sign of the reconciling power of Jesus Christ. But the people of God must have a visible, local expression — a community that is empowered through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to do what Jesus commanded us to do: make disciples. It is the local community of believers, not merely the abstract concept of a universal Body of Christ, that puts this mandate to work and makes it real.
2. The Church Is a Way of Life, not a Weekly Event

Protestant ecclesiology has placed much emphasis on the preaching of God’s Word and the proper administration of the sacraments. Over time this has led to a reduced understanding of “church” as merely the place we go once a week to receive biblical exposition, right doctrine and the sacraments. The level of engagement has shrunk from a seven-days-a-week lifestyle to a Sunday-morning-only event, and thus the opportunities for its members to grow in the disciple-making journey have been significantly reduced. While there is no question that the weekly coming together as a community is important for worship and instruction, a true biblical understanding of the church does not support such reductionism. The church is an unstoppable movement of God’s people who share in each other’s lives. It is far more than a weekly assembly. It is a disciple-making community; a way of life rather than an event.

3. The Church Is an Organism, not an Organization

The Body of Christ, even at a local level, clearly has organization. There are different “parts” with specific functions and each part must do its unique work for mutual edification. Early church communities designated roles and responsibilities within the community of believers to make sure the functions of the church were well served. However, the entire metaphor of a “body” emphasizes a living organism. The organization of the parts does not make a body human. It is the life within the body and the relationships beyond itself that make a body human. Likewise, the church is not primarily an organization of roles and authorities; it is primarily an organism alive in relationship with God and with the world.

1 Confessio Augustana: “The church is the congregations of the saints in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered.” From The Confessions of Saint Augustine, Edward Bouverie Pusey, trans. (A.D. 401).

The biblical emphasis is clear: We are each like living stones that, when joined together, create a holy temple. The primary focus must be on the community of God’s people and not on the buildings we occupy.”
4. The Church Is a Community, not an Institution

All ecclesiastical institutions (seminaries, denominational structures, mission boards, publishing houses, etc.) should be supportive structures to serve the local church in its life and mission. As author Howard Snyder points out, “One of the greatest needs of the institutional church today is for a clear and sharp distinction between the church as biblically presented and the varied, subsidiary, ecclesiastical institutions, including denominational structures, that we so frequently confuse with the church.”

It is, of course, understandable that the church has an institutional side to it as a social reality. Every new movement in Christian history has, over time, institutionalized certain aspects of its work and its doctrines. Sociologically speaking, a certain degree of formation as an institution is unavoidable. But the essence of the church is not found in being an institution; it is found in community.

5. The Church Is the Living Stones, not the Buildings

The Greek word kyriake, with its original meaning “of the Lord,” became in early-church history synonymous with the “Lord’s Day” and later with the “church building.” This usage paved the way for the sad misunderstanding of the church as being simply a building where we go. Again, church buildings are not the problem in and of themselves; it is the identification of the church as a building that is problematic. The biblical emphasis is clear: We are each like living stones that, when joined together, create a holy temple. The primary focus must be on the community of God’s people and not on the buildings we occupy.

6. The Church Makes Disciples, not Programs

The church is the bearer of the Great Commission. The making of disciples is best done (and perhaps exclusively made possible) in community. The local and personal community of believers provides the fabric of relationships through which God nurtures each individual’s growth into Christlikeness. Within that community the growing disciple serves and, by serving, grows. The many tools, resources and programs of the church are instruments to be used within the disciple-making relationships of community. They are not substitutes for those relationships and should never be valued over those relationships.

7. The Church Is the Hope for the World, not Focused on Itself

The church carries the good news of God’s love through Jesus Christ to the world. The church makes disciples who seek to align all aspects of their lives and relationships with God’s intent, thus furthering and extending the kingdom of God. God’s people influence every aspect of society and are in the center of His plan for history. The church is God’s Plan A for the reconciliation and restoration of all of life. The church has unmatched capacity to do good on the planet and is the most effective agent to bring about societal transformation.

---

4 Ephesians 2:21-22; 1 Peter 2:5

---

3 Kyriake is also the word from which we get the English word “church.”

---
Compassion is committed to the church, the local body of believers, that dynamic community of disciple-making people empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are committed to the church, the universal body of believers, that spiritual entity that transcends space and time.

Our commitment to the church is demonstrated most evidently by our commitment to partner with local churches to fulfill our mission. Our Core Values say, “The Church is the great hope for the world and is God’s instrument to advance the kingdom of God. We mobilize and connect the global Body of Christ to fulfill her mandate for holistic discipleship of children in poverty.”

We are committed to the local church, that local outpost of the Body of Christ. Compassion defines the local church as “the local body of believers that would be recognized by the community as an organized center of worship and outreach.”

---

1 Compassion International, Core Values booklet, 5.
Compassion serves as a bridge between the different parts of the Body of Christ to enable her to fulfill her destiny. Compassion is a facilitator of blessing, flowing between the church in different parts of the world. The church is spiritually one organism, one body. It is only natural and right that resources and love should flow freely through that body. Like the early church who felt it only right to help their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem during their time of hardship, it is only right today for the resource-rich parts of the church to partner with the resource-poor parts of the church, so that the mission may advance and Jesus may be glorified.

It is important to understand that we don’t work through the church; rather, we work with the church. They are our partners, not a tool for us to use. Working with the church is more than a strategy. We believe there really is no other choice. The church is God’s one and only plan for redeeming the world. There is no “Plan B.” At the end of the day, it is not about us [Compassion], it is about the church. So, we approach churches with the humble perspective that it is indeed a privilege for us to partner with them in living out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.²

Therefore, Compassion recognizes each local church partner as the local and personal expression of the Bride of Christ. As such we commit to the following:

1. Compassion will honor and respect the local church as we interact together.
2. Compassion will embrace our role as “parachurch” and affirm that we are, by godly design, called to serve the church.

² Compassion International, Core Values booklet, “Committed to the Church,” 10.
3. Compassion acknowledges that we are serving and supporting the local church’s ministry to children, rather than the church being merely a tool or channel for “Compassion’s program.

4. Compassion connects the global Body of Christ to better fulfill the church’s mission of discipleship by effectively engaging in the holistic development of children in poverty.

We pray that our Lord Jesus Christ will restore local churches around the world to the effectiveness of the Acts 2 church in transforming individuals, families, communities and nations.

We pray that God will open the eyes of the pastors and leaders of local churches around the world, enabling them to see the church from God’s perspective — as the glorious Bride of Christ; the unstoppable force on earth; the only plan He has to fulfill His mission; and the hope for a troubled world.

We pray for disciple-making churches around the globe to reproduce themselves by walking alongside other local churches in their journey of rediscovering their call, authority, nature and focus of making disciples of all nations.

We pray that God will continue to use Compassion to strengthen local congregations and to inspire other organizations to walk alongside churches, as they seek to fulfill their call in this generation.

Epilogue

Compassion’s Prayer for the Local Church
Compassion International is a Christian holistic child development ministry currently working to release more than 1.2 million children from poverty. Nearly 60 years of child development experience have shaped Compassion’s understanding of children and childhood as critically important for individual, family, community and national transformation.

The Compassion Difference

- **Christ Centered.** Each child has an opportunity to hear the gospel in an age-appropriate and culturally relevant way.
- **Child Focused.** Engaging each child as a complete person, we protect and nurture each child in all aspects of his or her growth.
- **Church Based.** We partner with local Christian churches to equip them for ministry with children.
- **Committed to Integrity.** We are dedicated to delivering excellent programs with integrity.
Compassion’s Mission Statement

In response to the Great Commission, Compassion exists as an advocate for children, to release them from their spiritual, economic, social and physical poverty and enable them to become responsible and fulfilled Christian adults.

Publishing at Compassion

God nurtures a very special relationship with the poor and the oppressed. Those without the power to change their lot. Nowhere do forces of poverty and oppression do more harm than in the lives of the world’s poorest children.

That is why Compassion publishes books to help Christians understand the destruction poverty inflicts. To see the potential of children crushed in its grip. And to unleash the overwhelming power of the church to free children — one by one, village by village, nation by nation.

When Christians spend themselves in the development of a child, they are invested in the purpose of God. These books inform that cause and inspire action. These books enable the church to experience God’s call of releasing children from poverty in Jesus’ name.

The Blue Corner

Every book that rolls off the press through Publishing at Compassion bears a symbol of God’s intent. Our blue corner points back to Leviticus 23:22:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, don’t reap the corners of your field or gather the gleanings. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners.” (MSG)

This symbol is a reminder to leave a “corner of our lives” on behalf of the poor.

— Proverbs 31:8-9