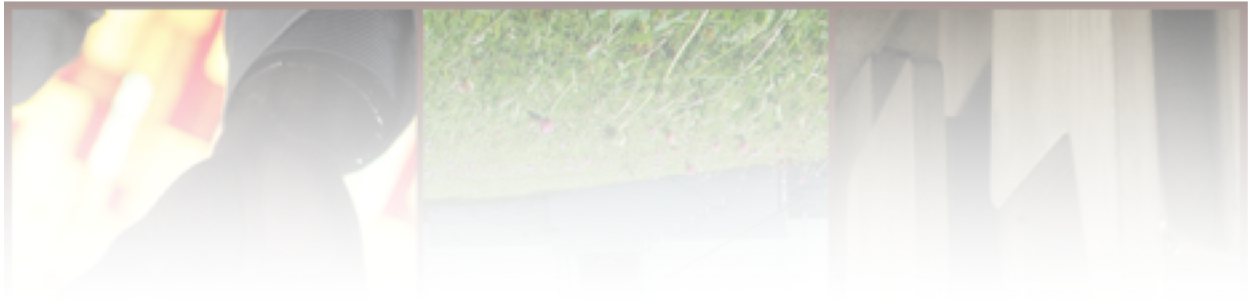


# Church: What it is and why it matters



Kenmore Presbyterian Church

# Church: What it is and why it matters

This term in Growth Groups we're going to be studying the *church*. Why do we need to studying a topic like the church? For many of us, we have been part of churches for most of our lives. Surely we know all that there is to know about the church!

As a group of Christians it is helpful for us to talk *together* about what we think church is and to return to the Bible and allow God's word to shape and inform our thinking on church. We want to be as like-minded as possible and as Biblical as possible.

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul has some big things to say about the church,

'That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for **the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.**' (Eph 1:19-23 NIV)

The church is at the centre of God's plans. It's related to who the resurrected Christ is. But what does this church have to do with what happens on Sunday (or at Growth Group)? It's our plan to explore what the Bible says about the church.

Study 1 - Church: Gathering

Study 2 - Church: Listening

Study 3 - Church: Encouraging

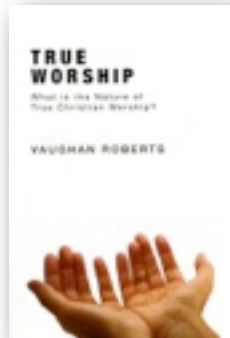
Study 4 - Church: Giving

Study 5 - Church: Serving and Loving

Study 6 - Church: Building and Growing

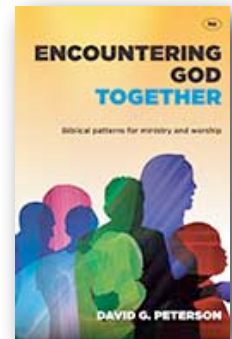
## Recommended Reading

There's lots (and lots) of books that have been written about the Church. But here's a couple that have shaped these studies.



*True Worship* by Vaughan Roberts is a pretty short book and a great introduction to some of the topics we're looking at (and others that we're not spending as much time on). Primarily he's written to help us to understand what Jesus meant by saying that God's worshippers must worship in 'Spirit and Truth' (John 4:24). It's only 106 pages and very easy to read.

*Encountering God Together* by David Peterson is much longer and more detailed book than *True Worship*. It's a practical book, and has some good ideas of how the things that the bible teaches about church will shape things like the 'order of service' on Sunday and how we sing and pray together.



# Church: Gathering

## *Get Thinking:*

List different things you can mean when you say the word *church*.

## ***The First Church***

The first *church* in the bible isn't in the New Testament, it's back at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-31 and reflected back in Deuteronomy 4). In Deuteronomy 4 the Israelites are on the edge of the promised land and Moses is giving his final words to them.

As you read from Deuteronomy 4 keep an eye out for the word *assemble*. That's the word that is usually translated as *church* in the New Testament.

### ***Read Deuteronomy 4:5-14***

1. What were the people to do when they assembled?
2. Who spoke to them?
3. What were they told?

'God gathers his people to himself as an act of grace  
[...] Every gathering should be gospel-shaped.'

David Peterson

At Mount Sinai, the Israelites *assembled* (or *gathered* or maybe even '*churched*') together. As God's people, rescued from slavery in Egypt, they gathered around God to hear His word.

This is the pattern set for church in the Old Testament. And this gathering becomes the pattern which is fulfilled in the New Testament.

## ***The Heavenly Church***

### ***Read Hebrews 12:18-29***

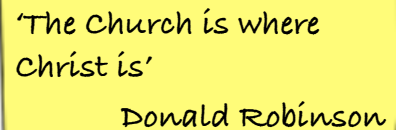
4. What have we *not* come to (vv18-21)?
5. What have we come to (vv22-24)?
6. Where is this church?
7. As part of this church, what are we warned about? How is this similar to the church at Mount Sinai?

**Think about it...**

8. Verse 28 begins 'therefore ...'. What should we do as the heavenly church?

Hebrews 13 goes on to show what 'acceptable worship' is. It has little to do with the way we sing or pray and more to do with how we live.

The *heavenly church* is something every Christian is part of now. We are 'seated [...] with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus' (Eph 2:6). Like Israel before Mount Sinai, we *gather* around the throne of Jesus, listening to His word.



'The Church is where  
Christ is'  
Donald Robinson

This is the same picture we see in Revelation 21-22, though the word *church* isn't mentioned. As citizens of the new, heavenly city we gather round the 'throne of God and of the Lamb' (Rev 22:1).

## ***The Church Is Where Christ Is***

As Christians we are gathered around Jesus in heaven, and we gather here on earth too. In Hebrews 10 the writer instructs us not to give up meeting together.

What does all this mean for the *church* as we normally think of it, Christians gathering week by week?

**Think about it...**

9. Why should Christians gather together?
10. How is 'Church' different to other gatherings?
11. How should the heavenly and future 'church' shape what we do when we gather for church?

## ***Keep Thinking: Visible and Invisible Church***

Over the years theologians have thought long and hard about the *invisible* church (every follower of Jesus, now and through history - gathered in heaven) and the *visible* church (our local gatherings, like church on Sunday), and the connection between the two. How we understand these things has real implications, touching on questions like:

- What must happen when we gather for our gathering to be church?
- Is Church on Sunday a means to an end, or the end in itself?
- How do non-Christians fit in a Church gathering? Should they?
- What part do 'denominations' play? People often refer to a denomination as a church, but aren't they simply organisational structures?
- ....



# Church: Listening

## *Get Thinking:*

Think about what happened at church last Sunday. What elements do you think can be taken out of a church meeting before it stops being *church*?

Listening to God's word is at the heart of 'church'. It's one of the things that can't be removed. In last week's study we saw God's word at the centre of all the gatherings. At Mount Sinai the people of Israel 'stood before the LORD your God' (Deut 4:10), and they *heard God's voice* (v12). In the heavenly gathering, we are brought together by the *word* that Jesus' blood speaks (the gospel), and are warned to not ignore God's voice (Heb 12:24-25). In the same way we gather in Jesus name to listen to Him. Today we'll explore some of what this means for our experience of church.

## ***Be Devoted To...***

### *Read Acts 2:37-47*

1. How did people become 'added to their number'?
2. What did these new Christians devote themselves to?

From the beginning church has been about listening to God's word, the gospel. It was as a result of Peter's preaching of the gospel that 3,000 people 'repented and believed'. As new Christians they gathered together to hear the apostles teach the gospel.

### *Think about it...*

3. How can we be devoted to the apostles' teaching?

We've seen how the earliest Christians shaped their gatherings. Listening to God was primary as they met. We're now going to read some instructions from Paul to Timothy, his apprentice. These instructions are directed to a leader in the church and they show what's important for us as a church.

### *Read 1 Tim 4:13*

4. What is Timothy to devote himself to?

Devote yourself to...	Your description (and possible differences between each)

*Think about it...*

5. Why are each of these activities important?
6. How can our church be devoted to these things?

*Read 2 Tim 3:10-4:5*

7. What is scripture useful for?
8. Why is scripture useful for this?
9. What is Paul's charge to Timothy?
10. When should he be ready to preach?
11. How should Timothy preach?
12. How does the usefulness of scripture relate to preaching?
13. Why does Timothy need to be careful when he preaches (vv3-5)?

*'A deaf church is a dead church'*  
*John Stott*

*Think about it...*

14. In what sense (if any) can we say that when we listen to the **bible read** we are listening to God?
15. In what sense (if any) can we say that when we listen to **preaching** we are listening to God?
16. In what sense (if any) can we say that when we **sing together** we are listening to God?



17. In what sense (if any) can we say that when we listen to **each other** we are listening to God?

### ***Application***

18. Are we devoted to these things in our church? How is that expressed in the way that we 'do church'?

19. What could we do to keep 'listening to God' central in our church services?

20. What things make it hard to listen to God at church?

21. What things make it easier to listen to God at church?



Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/itspaulkelly/3274217639/>

### ***Keep Thinking: Where do you worship?***

People sometimes use the word *worship* to mean the same thing as *church*. So the question 'where do you worship' really means 'which church are you a member of'. Another common understanding of *worship* means singing at church. So the person who leads the singing is often called the *worship leader*.

However, the New Testament doesn't use the word *worship* in this way. In Hebrews we find that Jesus is the true worshipper. He is our great high priest who gave himself as the *sacrifice* for our sins (Hebrews 10:1-18). Because of Jesus we no longer need special times and places when we can 'draw near to God'. We are already near to Him.

The basic understanding of Christian worship comes from Romans 12:1, 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living *sacrifices*, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of *worship*.' Worship isn't limited to what we do when we gather together in Jesus' name. It's something Christians do as we live our lives in submission to the Lord Jesus. Worship is closely connected with service and sacrifice more than singing and praising. And our worship/service/sacrifice is motivated by our appreciation of Jesus' worship/service/sacrifice as we offer ourselves to God, as living sacrifices. Church on Sunday can give us the opportunity to worship/serve/sacrifice together and can create more opportunities for service too. But our worship does not stop when we finish packing away the last chair on Sunday.

As David Peterson says, 'Worship terminology is used in the New Testament to describe the saving work of Jesus and how we should respond to the message of his grace.'

(If you want to keep thinking about this, you can watch this video <http://www.phillipjensen.com/video/do-we-go-to-church-to-worship/>, read Hebrews, or the first few chapters of Vaughan Roberts, *True Worship*.)

# Church: Encouraging

## *Get Thinking:*

We talk a lot about ‘encouraging’ each other as Christians... but what do you think we mean by that?

In our previous study on *listening* we focussed on some of the ‘up front’ things that happen at church, preaching and reading the bible, and reflected on how through these things we are listening to God. This week we’re exploring another way we listen to God—and it’s something that we all do with each other.

## ***Don’t Give up***

### *Read Hebrews 10:19-22*

1. What should we have confidence to do?
2. What reason do we have confidence to do this?

### *Think about it...*

3. Are ‘entering the Most Holy Place’ and ‘drawing near to God’ ways of talking about coming to Church? If not, what is this passage talking about?

‘Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.’

John Calvin

### *Read Hebrews 10:23-25*

4. What are we told to do in the light of verses 19-22?
5. Which of these let us statements are about things we do with one another?
6. What is the Day that’s approaching?
7. Why does the Day make things more urgent?

Have a go at writing out verses 24-25 in your own words.

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*Think about it...*

8. Do you gather as church primarily for the benefit of yourself, others, or God?
9. How do we spur/encourage others? Give an example of how you've been encouraged?

***Don't Harden Your Heart***

*Read Hebrews 3:7-13*

10. When is Today (v7, 13)?
11. What are we to do daily?
12. Why do we need encouragement?

*Think about it...*

13. Putting together Hebrews 3 and 10, why do we need to gather with other believers?

***Teach and Admonish***

Reading Hebrews reminds us that we gather together as God's people to encourage each other. We all need encouragement to live godly lives and to keep trusting Jesus. But how does this encouragement happen when we meet?

*Read Colossians 3:15-17*

14. What is the 'one body' that we are members of?
15. How does the word of Christ dwell in us?
16. What three things should we do because of this?
17. How should we do these things?

*Think about it...*

18. What role does singing have when we gather? How might this change the way that you sing at church?

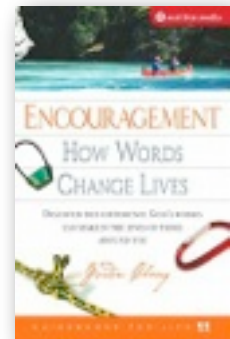
***Application***

19. How can we use morning tea/supper to encourage each other? (Get practical—what are some conversation starters that will help this to happen.)
20. How can we encourage each other better at Growth Group?

21. How might our 'song selection' be used to encourage?
22. How can our 'body-language' during a sermon be used to 'encourage'?
23. What can we be modelling to the younger members of our church family in order to encourage them?

### **Further Reading**

If you'd like to read more about *encouragement*, have a look at Gordon Cheng's *Encouragement: How Words Change Lives*. <http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/encouragement-how-words-change-lives>



*'Christian encouragement is speaking the truth in love, with the aim of building Christians up in Christ-likeness, as we wait for the day of judgement. Christian encouragement will likewise involve speaking the truth in love to unbelievers, thus encouraging them to put their trust in Christ for forgiveness and salvation.'*

*Gordon Cheng*

### **Keep Thinking: Music and Singing at Church**

Over the years disagreements over music and singing in church have caused many divisions and much pain. Of course it should not be that way, and I'm not trying to stir up an argument.... but...

We sing to **praise** God (Psalm 150). What is praise? It's the idea of 'advertising' how good God is (1 Peter 2:9). It's both a right response to God, and helpful for each other.

Singing is also related to **listening** to God - when we sing biblical truths. So singing is a way of **encouraging** one another with the truth of God's Word (Colossians 3:15-17), packaged in a way that can include personal experience and emotion

But of course there are always dangers with music (as there are with preaching etc.). It might be bringing attention to an individual singer or musician (for good or bad reasons). It's easy to distort the truth, but to let it slide because 'it's a good song'.

# Church: Giving

What follows is a discussion rather than a Bible study.<sup>1</sup>

## *Giving and Church*

As a Church we do not focus on finances. However, we do need to talk about money because growing in generosity is part of growing as a Christian. And consistent giving enables us to plan ahead as a church.

*“But just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.” 2 Corinthians 8:7 NIV*

As Christians we are to be generous. We have benefited from God’s great generosity to us in Jesus, and the Bible encourages us to be like our heavenly Father. We are to be generous toward the work of the gospel, toward each other, and toward people who are in need.

*“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.” 2 Corinthians 8:9, NIV.*

The purpose of what follows is to guide you with regard to financial giving. It aims to help you think about giving from a Biblical perspective, and evaluate (or re-evaluate) the practicalities of how you give.

## *How Much to Give?*

### **a. The principle is generosity...**

In the Old Testament, God's people gave a tenth of their produce to God in response to his generous blessings to them ('the tithe'). The idea of giving a tenth is first seen in Abraham and Jacob (Gen 14, 28), and is then made explicit in the Law of Moses. A tithe was to be given generously with much rejoicing, not legalistically or begrudgingly (Num 18, Deut 12, 14, 26, 2 Chr 31, Mal 3).

Having received the tithe from Israel, God then redirects it to his work - to the priests and Levites, as well as to those in need, such as widows and orphans.

In addition to the tithe the Israelites also gave free-will offerings (eg. Exodus 32:29, Lev 7:16...).

In the New Testament, there is no command to tithe. But we are to give in response to God’s generous blessings to us (note the language of "an offering acceptable to God" in Phil 4:18). Tithing is not the principle in the New Testament, generosity is. Indeed we have benefited from God's generosity to us in the death of his Son, who though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich (2 Cor 8:9). If we truly

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<sup>1</sup> It is actually a re-shaping of the content of our ‘*Guide to Giving*’.

understand the gospel, we will cheerfully give as much as we can, and even beyond our ability (2 Cor 8-9)!

So how much should we give away? Whatever we can! Don't be limited to thinking in terms of a tithe. For example, Paul commends the Churches in Macedonia because out of their poverty, they gave with great generosity for the support of their fellow Christians. How much you give will depend on you, your income, your situation, but the principle is other-person centeredness and generosity.

### **b. Generosity In practice...**

There are many ways this might work out. Here are four examples:

- Plan a household budget for the year and decide how much to give in total to Christian ministries in relation to spending in other areas and total income.
- Or give a fixed percentage of your total income, then budget to live on the remainder yourself.
- Or budget to live on a certain amount and divide the rest up to give away.
- Or decide who you want to give to, and how much, and adjust your lifestyle to live on your remaining income.

Whichever way you choose, as with any lifestyle decision, it will be a matter of prayerfully reviewing, perhaps each year, and making adjustments as different situations and opportunities arise. Families with older children might let their children become part of the decision making process, to model a proper attitude to money and giving.

If you have never budgeted before, it might be a very useful exercise to do. It helps you to see where your money goes, identify areas of overspending or under spending, and then work out how to direct money into the areas you would like it to go.

### ***Who to Give to?***

In the Old Testament, the Israelite tithe was channelled by God to those who needed it - to the priests and Levites who had no other source of income because of their duties, and to the poor.

We see a similar pattern in the New Testament, where Christian giving is directed to meeting the needs of those who labour amongst us in the Lord, as well as towards the poor. As Paul puts it in Galatians 6 "Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches". Then a few verses later "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith".

In practical terms, this means directing our money not only towards Church, but to the work of the gospel further afield, and to those in need (including those within our church who are in need).

## **a. Giving to Church**

The ministry of our church receives its support from the giving of our church family. Most, almost all, of the budget is spent on gospel work - supporting our paid workers, as well as 'missionaries'. An increase in our income does not mean any individual gets paid more. But it does mean the possibility of growing our ministry team – and as our church continues to grow in number we need to work towards putting on more staff.

Each year we have a Congregational meeting at which we agree on a budget. In large part this is us agreeing as a church how much we can see ourselves being able to give to church.

## **b. Giving Beyond Church**

There are other Christian organisations and individuals that you will wish to support such as:

- missionaries and missionary organisations (e.g. CMS and AFES)
- Friends in ministry or other gospel workers (at university, overseas, etc.)
- people in need in our Church family
- a specific person in need or perhaps a Compassion child
- an aid organisation

## *General Discussion*

Hopefully you have had plenty of healthy discussion as you have worked your way through these notes. If not, please do talk freely about what you have read. Here are some additional discussion starters.

1. What have these notes failed to mention?
2. Is there anything wrong with adhering to a strict tithing principle?
3. What happens when we find ourselves in financially difficult times?
4. Is it wrong for someone who is in financial need to receive more from brothers and sister in Christ than they give themselves?
5. How can we teach and model gospel generosity to our children and to each other?
6. Is anonymity important when it comes to 'giving' to church?

## *Pray*

Thank God for his generosity to us in so many ways - but above all in the gift of forgiveness and new life. And pray for each other, asking that we would help each other grow in generosity. Pray too for our Church finances and for the Committee of Management who serve us by managing the finances.



# Church: Serving and Loving

## *Get Thinking:*

If you were moving interstate and needed to find a new church, how would you pick a healthy church?

In this study we're going to focus on 1 Corinthians 12-14. Paul, writing to a highly divided church about the need to love and serve each other. These chapters can raise questions about tongues and prophecy but in this study we're going to concentrate on what they tell us about **church**. These chapters are interested in the gathering of God's people around God's word (see 14:19, 26).

## *Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11*

1. What is the same for everyone who has the Spirit?
2. What is different for people who have the Spirit?
3. What is the purpose of the differences?

## *Think about it...*

4. What makes someone spiritual?

This letter is written to a divided church. One of the reasons it's divided is because some think their contribution to the church is more significant than others. Paul has begun to disarm that way of thinking by showing the *spiritual* person is the person who calls Jesus **Lord** and who serves selflessly.

## *Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31*

5. What unifies the body of Christ?
6. Why is there a need for diversity in the body of Christ?
7. What makes a gift greater? What makes it excellent? (v31)

## *Think about it...*

8. How does the metaphor of body shape the way that you think about serving?
9. How can some gifts be greater and there still be equality in the body?

10. In what ways does our church have 'equal concern for each other' (v25)? How could we do better at this?

Chapter 13 is the famous *love* chapter (read it if you have time). You may have heard it at weddings. As we've seen by reading chapter 12 this part of the bible is about church and how we are to *lovingly serve* each other. As Paul says with dramatic language, it doesn't matter how impressively you serve, or how 'gifted' you may be, if it doesn't come out of love it's nothing.

**Think about it...**

11. How/why do you serve at church? Does it flow out of love?

"The right question to ask is not so much 'what is my gift?' as 'How can I serve?'"

Vaughan Roberts

**Application**

12. What are areas at our church/growth group where there's a need?
13. How could your group serve to fill that need?
14. What gifts/abilities do you have that you currently aren't using 'for the common good'?

**Further Reading**

If you'd like to read more about *serving*, have a look at John Hindley's *Serving without Sinking*. <http://www.thegoodbook.com.au/christian-living/ebooks/serving-without-sinking>

There's also an interesting online article, *What's so spiritual about gifts*, by Michael Jensen that will help in thinking about 1 Corinthians 12-14.

<http://www.biblesociety.org.au/news/christian-living/whats-so-spiritual-about-gifts>



Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/edgeplot/208618609/>

## ***Keep Thinking: Church and our place in the World***

*There are many ways the place of the 'church' in 'the world' is misunderstood. Here are a few examples to think about.*

1. "The purpose of the church is to reach the world for Christ". As Christians we all share the desire that others will join us in living for Jesus. However, you will agree that evangelism does not define what church is, nor why church exists. Perhaps it is better to think of evangelism as God's task, in which He chooses to use individual Christians. Then as a 'church' we encourage, help/equip, and perhaps work together in sharing the gospel and our lives. But the idea of, for example, running a church service for the benefit of 'outsiders', may mean sacrificing church for evangelism. hmmm. Certainly makes you think.
2. "The church is here to serve the community". This seems to be an increasingly common idea. But I hope you can perceive some problems with it. For example as Christians we want to see people join us in living with Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. We don't want to join the community in serving other things. So any acts of love and service we 'offer' the community will necessarily have a 'salty' edge to them. Which is not, I think, what people mean or expect when they talk about church serving the community.



# Church: Growing and Building

## *Get Thinking*

How do you measure Christian growth?

Ephesians is a great book of the Bible to teach us about church. It begins with a big picture of God's plan of salvation. This cosmic view finishes with the declaration that 'God placed all things under [Jesus'] feet and appointed him to be head over everything *for the church*' (1:22). Then in chapter 2 we read of the great privileges of being saved from sin and united to Christ. We have been brought to life and rescued from the power of sin and Satan. And to cap it off, 'God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus' (2:6) (maybe this reminds you of Hebrews 12?).

God has made a new people. Both Jews and Gentiles are now united together in 'one body' (2:15). And it's this body (which in vv19-22 becomes a household, nation, and temple) which is growing, or being built.

## *Read Ephesians 2:19-22*

1. What were we and what have we become?
2. What is this building founded upon?
3. What is this the goal of this building?

## *Think about it...*

4. How do make sure that our *building* has the right foundations?
5. Think about the goal of this building project. How does this goal effect what we do when we gather?

## *Read Ephesians 4:1-6*

6. What things we are we urged to do?
7. What does Paul command us to do?
8. What are we to make every effort to do?

## *Think about it...*

9. What is the calling?

10. Why is church unity important? (think also back to 2:19-22)

***Read Ephesians 4:7-13***

11. Who are the gifts that Jesus gives?

12. Why were these gifts given?

***Think about it...***

13. How do the gifts prepare us for 'works of service'?

14. How do 'works of service' build the church?

15. What 'works of service' can you be doing to build up our church?

***Read Ephesians 4:14-16***

16. As we become mature:

- What will we not do?
- What will we do?
- What is the goal of growth?
- How does 'each part' do its work?

***Think about it...***

17. What does it mean to be mature?

***Application***

18. How can you be 'making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace'?

19. What can we be doing at Growth Group and Church to keep everyone growing in Christ?

20. Are you growing and maturing?

21. Who are you encouraging to grow and mature?

22. How might you be able to 'stretch' yourself this year in your involvement with church. What could you try that you have not done before (or not done for a while).

## ***Keep Thinking: Planted to Grow, Growing to Plant***

Back in 2006 we started a new church in Kenmore, enthusiastic to see the new church grow to the point of planting again, and growing some more and planting some more.

As we have grown numerically the feel of church has changed. The way we do things has had to change. The overall level of involvement and participation changed. People changed. Some change has been exciting. Other change has been difficult.

Over the years we have seen people come and we have seen others leave. The constant change in who makes up our church has come with joy and pain.

We are a very different group of people to the small group that started a church in Kenmore. So it is good for to spend these few weeks thinking and talking together about 'Church'—what it is and why it matters. It helps us to get back to basics and be like-minded. And most importantly it helps us in growing in maturity in Christ.

While numerical growth is not the only measure of growth our challenge is to see our congregations growing numerically so that we can sustain what we have set out to do. What can we do to help see this happen?