

Biblical *Ekklesia*

By L.D. Waterman

One of the topics discussed in depth at this year's Bridging the Divide consultation was "*Ekklesia* (church, kingdom and *ummah*. What does it mean to belong?)." As noted in the [Bridging the Divide 2015 Consultation Report](#), among the items on which those gathered reached consensus was: "Having a clear idea of essential elements of a biblical *ekkklesia* (church) greatly helps in integrating believers from Muslim background into the Body of Christ."

Given the diversity of participants gathered at BtD 2015, phrases like "clear idea" and "essential elements" carry great weight. How can we come to a *clear* idea? And what would be considered *essential* elements of a biblical *ekkklesia*?

In our day, hundreds of thousands of Muslims are coming to saving faith in Christ. And the Lord appears pleased to use a wide variety of "wineskins" for integrating those believers from a Muslim background into His Body – both locally and globally. At least four factors have brought to the fore a need for clear thinking in the shaping and describing of gatherings of believers. First, the challenging nature of many Islamic contexts including likely persecution of those born Muslim who begin to live out biblical faith in Jesus. Second, historic tension between Muslims and Christians in many places; third, the wide variety of creative approaches being used in gatherings of believers; and fourth, the claims of ministries (often connected in some way to fundraising) that their work has planted X number of churches in a specified amount of time.

Can a group rightly be considered a church if their only gatherings are spontaneous (on occasions such as a birthday celebration)? Or if they do not identify themselves as any sort of church? Is it a church if the gathering only consists of two or three people? Or if their gatherings all exist under the authority of the local mosque and imam? (These questions were considered in my October 2011 EMQ article "[What is Church?](#)")

After significant reading and discussion, those gathered at BtD 2015 agreed that the essential elements of a biblical church might include something like this: "A biblical *ekkklesia* is a group of Jesus' followers having an identity as a church (*ekkklesia*) who gather together regularly on an ongoing basis, with recognized leadership under the headship of Christ, to worship God and encourage one another in obeying all his commands including baptism and the Lord's Supper. These local communities should be in communion with the wider body of Christ (local, worldwide and historical)."

Agreement with this description (or something similar) does not negate the validity of many other kinds of gatherings of followers of Jesus. It does, however, give a possible point of reference for better informed discussion and reports of church planting and church planting movements.

One fruitful approach points newly forming congregations to relevant Scripture passages and allows them to discover biblical teaching and find locally relevant ways to apply that teaching.

Steve Smith describes a creative way to do that in his article “[The Bare Essentials of Helping Groups Become Churches](#).” This article introduces a very helpful diagnostic tool called Church Health Mapping (Church Circles). This can help those within a group and those outside it to discern if it has become a church (*ekklesia*) as described in the New Testament.

This is not the final answer, but better agreement on terms can lead to better interaction and more effective ministry for the Lord’s glory. It’s worth our careful consideration.