

Female and Fertile: Leader's Guide

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From the *Missional Bible Studies* series
of the Center for U.S. Missions

Scriptures describe the church as the 'body of Christ' (Romans 12; I Corinthians 12) – a living organism. Living things reproduce, institutions generally don't. This study looks at scriptural descriptions of the church, explores the repercussions of the Bible's portrayal of the church as female, and encourages application to your local congregation.

1. Help the group reflect about your church's earliest beginnings as a new "mission outpost." If you do not have sufficient history in the congregation to answer these questions yourself, gather with others who can provide and pool the information. The goal is not to focus on the past, but to see how changes in the community are or aren't reflected in the church.
2. There is a profound similarity between the birthing of a human life and the birthing of a new congregation. Growth to maturity comes in phases. Both of them experience conception, pre-natal development, birth, and adolescence and both have capacity for reproduction.
3. References to the church as female strongly suggest a reproductive capacity of the Body of Christ. Jesus Christ is the Groom and the church (Body of Christ) is the Bride. One day the Groom will come for his bride and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb will commence. Until that time, the Bride of Christ (church) is to continue and extend the redemptive work which Jesus incarnated in his physical body.

Extend the discussion to other references of the church as female. The text of *The Church's One Foundation* is one example:

The Church's one foundation/Is Jesus Christ **her** Lord;
She is his new creation/By water and the Word.
From heav'n he came and sought **her**/To be his **holy bride**;
With his own blood he bought **her**/And for **her** life he died. (LW 289, stanza 1)

All of this biblical language leaves no doubt that, in order to accurately portray the church, it must be female. Even to this day we have *sister churches*, not "brother churches". And when a congregation "gives birth" to a new mission congregation, it is a *mother church* giving birth to a *daughter church*, not a "father church" giving birth to a "son church".

4. [Give some suggested answers: nurture, care for children, gentle, loving...]
5. Discussion thoughts: The church's reproductive capacity will lead many congregations to engage directly in disciple-making and *daughter church* planting. Daughter church planting will always accompany disciple-making. Therefore daughter church planting is a biblical, ancient-future means by

which the Kingdom of God advances in the world ... not only in the apostolic age, but also in our (post) modern world today. Some have observed that the New Testament epistles are primarily instructions to new churches which had been birthed (planted) after the Diaspora in different areas of the ancient world.

Acts 1: 8 -- Spoken to his disciples at his ascension into heaven forty days after his resurrection from the dead, Jesus reiterates the intent of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). Believers in Jesus were to go into all the world and make disciples by preaching the Gospel. As a result (fruit) of "making disciples," new churches would be planted locally, provincially, cross-culturally and globally.

That was/is a grand and glorious vision! However, it never even happened until quite some time later. Notice that after Pentecost (the Birthday of the New Testament Church, signaled by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, hearing the Gospel in languages, mass conversion and baptism), the church continued to assemble in a single place in Jerusalem, possibly reaching a base of several thousand believers.

Acts 8:1 -- But the actual movement of Christ-witnesses out from the Jerusalem church and into the rest of the world did not happen until after the stoning of Stephen and when major persecution literally drove them out!

Persecution had caused these early Christians to leave the mother church in Jerusalem. And similar to the miracle of Pentecost, multitudes of new disciples heard the Gospel, repented and were converted by the Holy Spirit, working through the Word of God. And when new disciples are being made in grace-motivated obedience to the Great Commission, new churches will be "birthed" and planted.

Acts 11:19-21 -- After a new church was "birthed" and planted in Antioch of Syria, that congregation soon demonstrated its female capacity for reproduction by making disciples and becoming engaged in daughter church planting.

Acts 13:1-3 -- With the exception of Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria played a more important role in the early church than any other city. After Rome and Alexandria, Antioch was the largest city in the Roman world. In Antioch, the first Gentile church was founded, and there the believers were first called 'Christians' (Acts 11:26). The Apostle Paul used the city of Antioch as his home base during his missionary journeys. Antioch was the center of worship for several pagan cults that promoted sexual immorality and other forms of evil common to pagan religions. It was also a vital commercial center, the gateway to the eastern world. Antioch was a key city both to Rome and to the early church.

6. Ephesus appears to have been founded by the Apostle Paul and the husband and wife team of Aquila and Priscilla, after Paul's second missionary journey. The six churches mentioned in Revelation were in fairly close proximity to Ephesus, and were actually linked by a Roman road which could have provided a natural pathway for reproductive church planting in that particular region.
7. The reflection questions are designed to stimulate ongoing discussion in the congregation about the practical applications of seeing it as 'female and fertile.'

September 2006

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Accompanying Participant's Guide is also available from the Center for U.S. Missions.