

Understanding Ekklesia: An A3 Community Reflection and Expression of Faith

A3 Ekklesia Task Force with Joseph Handley

One of the key changes we will need to wrestle with for mission strategy will be what biblical *ekklesia* looks like today. As will be seen below, our mission (A3 formerly known as Asian Access) is actively exploring this concept as we seek to equip leaders for the Church of tomorrow. As will be readily apparent in reviewing the article (our ongoing discovery process), *ekklesia* looks quite different than what it has been traditionally known to be since the era of Constantine's empire. Of course, this has been true for many areas of the world for some time, but today, the issue is paramount for us as a global community to grapple with and understand.

PROLOGUE

A3 envisions a vibrant community of people seeking to both be personally transformed and transform our world by accelerating Christ-centered movements around the world. Our mission is to equip and unify visionary Christ-centered leaders to influence Spirit-led change.

In its 2025 strategic plan, A3 identified several targets for the movement. One of the targets is to understand *ekklesia* (vis-à-vis the term church) as it relates to our 4th outcome in different spheres.¹ Our 4th outcome is to see, over a lifetime, each kingdom leader catalyzing Christ-centered movements in their various spheres of influence.

A3 is currently facilitating leadership development cohorts for church and marketplace leaders. We anticipate moving into additional spheres of influence, such as education, government, and entertainment. Because we want to see every kingdom leader catalyzing Christ-centered movement, we desire to understand (rather than define) how *ekklesia* relates to every sphere of human interaction.

The *Ekklesia* Task Force was called to meet from October 15-16, 2022, in Bangkok. As a result, a document was forged that we hope would contribute to the thoughts and ideas of the A2 movement in the understanding of *ekklesia*.

As part of the wider A2 community, we seek your input into this document in order to reflect a more nuanced understanding of *ekklesia* for our generation.

Other outputs we hope to do in the near future are

1. We choose the word to understand intentionally over define. A focus on defining can lead to setting boundaries. Instead, our desire is to understand the center of gravity of *ekklesia*. Though we all can agree that Jesus is the chief cornerstone, what purpose(s) and values of Christ's *ekklesia* can we discern that remain constant in any sea change? Also, can we surface clues based on scripture, history, and what we hear the Spirit of wisdom and revelation saying that might give the A2 movement insight as we foster expressions of *ekklesia* in a new era and in different spheres?

blogs, podcasts, short video teachings, etc., that make the ideas available to the movement.

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16, ESV)

A PRELIMINARY SKETCH

*Ekklesia*² as God's Elect and Holy Community

Ekklesia is a community of people (not a place or a building) of diverse backgrounds and ethnicity journeying together towards faith, love, and obedience to Jesus Christ as Lord and Messiah of the community.

Ekklesia is a holy community called out by the Father to be his possession in order that through it, His excellencies are proclaimed to the whole earth in every generation (1 Peter 2:9). This new community (Ephesians 2:14-15) consists of God's elected people, adopted, loved, and called out to do good works that He prepared in advance for them to do (Ephesians 1:5, 2:10, 1 John 4:19).

Ekklesia is where the presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are experienced, expressed, and embodied. Members of the *ekklesia* have received God's gift of salvation and offer of love through faith in Jesus Christ as a result of God's love for the world (Ephesians 2:8-9; John 4:19).

Ekklesia and the *Missio Dei* (Mission of God)

Ekklesia is first God's community before it is God's instrument in inaugurating his Kingdom and Mission to the whole of creation. The *missio dei* refers to God's desire to reconcile the whole world to himself in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-20), and it is the *missio dei* that birthed the *ekklesia* as the first fruit of God's redemptive work for the praise of His glory (Ephesians 1:12).

The *ekklesia* is a community of people who were reconciled to God through Christ. It is called to participate in the love of the triune God (1 John 4:19) and in the *missio dei* as ministers and ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20) in every sphere of human interaction and influence, be it physical or virtual.

Through the *ekklesia*, the personal calling of God's ambassadors of reconciliation is declared, the spiritual gifts are discovered, the characters are developed, and

2. We recognize both the universal and local dimensions of *ekklesia*: the body of Christ universal as well as the local church expressions of this word.

the competencies are disbursed for the *missio dei*.

The *ekklesia* affirms each member's design, calling, and role in recognition of and in relation to the greater *missio dei* to usher the Kingdom of God in every sphere of human interaction as ambassadors of reconciliation toward a belief and profession of Jesus Christ as Messiah.

Ekklesia and the Holy Spirit

The *ekklesia* as a community is imbued, with the Spirit of God, enabling each member to live intentionally and incarnationally in love, grace, and hospitality toward each other as the Triune God enables them.

The Spirit of truth leads and empowers the *ekklesia* and its members to fulfill its mission (*Missio Ecclesiae*), that is, to bear witness to Jesus Christ as God's Messiah (John 15:26) and to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Therefore, the *ekklesia* must rely on the Spirit for direction and discernment in relation to the life of the community and the *missio ecclesiae* in order that God might work through the *ekklesia* in fulfilling his *missio dei*.

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The Spirit of Truth, sent by the Father in Christ's name, serves as the *ekklesia's* counselor, comforter, guide, and helper who teaches the community and each member all that Christ has taught in the Scriptures in order that the *ekklesia* might bear witness to Jesus (John 14:16-17; 14:26; 15:26; 16:13).

Ekklesia in Contemporary Expression

releasing people into their purpose and calling

For centuries, history of global mission has been history of the advance of the church from the West. The majority of those who are in evangelical mission movements remain largely those who came through the conventional pathway of vocational ministry and think with a binary mindset of spiritual vs secular, hence naturally perpetuating a more institutional ecclesiastical mindset.

But, in fact, since the Reformation, when the priesthood of all believers became an important point of teaching in Martin Luther's theology, it was both an attempt to challenge the sole authority of the church and to rectify the misunderstood teaching about the

role of the ordinary believers.

Luther argued that there is no spiritual divide between ordained and lay people, and there is only "one estate" where all baptized believers belong.³ There is no tier differentiation of spirituality in anyone coming before God. By pronouncing such teaching, Luther rehabilitated the once de-sanctified temporal earthly realm and put it back in its rightful place. In the process, he also sought to debunk the belief that the spiritual world is over the temporal realm. British church historian Roland Bainton commented, "The repudiation of ordination as a sacrament demolished the caste system of clericalism and provided a sound basis for the priesthood of all believers . . . what the priest does any Christian may do, if commissioned by the congregation, because all Christians are priests."⁴

It is about embracing the diversity of spiritual gifts endowed in the body of Christ. While some are called to public ministry of teaching God's Word authoritatively, all believers are called by God to witness that which ultimately would build upon their faith from all walks of life. Paul Althaus made a fair observation, "Luther recognizes no community which is not a preaching community and no community in which all have not been called to be witnesses. Each one is to care for his brother with the consolation of the word which he needs in trouble."⁵ Within the community, each believer should be sensitive to live out the role and ministry of priesthood, to care and to witness in all circumstances. Through all believers' fleshing out their faith and witnesses in the community, a new understanding of *Ekklesia* has emerged.

A further implication of doing away the divide between spiritual and secular realm is that Luther has invested an unprecedented value and dignity in what used to be called "earthly vocations" among the laity, henceforth encouraging a life of sacrifice and worship of the "ordinary believers". While everyone remains staying in their lane, yet there is no longer just an earthly pursuit of the mundane, the material and the remunerated as all believers would lead a life to worship and glorify God as priests.

As individuals, such calling to reach out to our neighbors at various touch points of our work life and general lifestyle is like calling laity-priests to have their lives being poured out. Believers no longer just hide in their work lives and lament of the irrelevance of their Monday to Saturday to their spiritual faith lives. Faith and work do not belong to two different realms or two separate boxes. *Ekklesia* is no longer an enclave to run away from the world, but an outpost right on the frontline of the harvest field. We might be in unfriendly territories, yet our existence there

3. Luther differentiated between two estates and one estate in "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," in Luther's Works, 44:129.

4. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 106.

5. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 315-316.

remains relevant and engaging.

We are being prepared and called to the fallen world. It might look like as an easier path to keep faith matter private and personal from Monday to Saturday, and just to go back to enjoy the Christian experience and the fellowship on Sunday at and after the worship. Yet, this is an abdication of our identity and our purpose. We are being forgiven and redeemed so that we may become a conduit of peace and love to those who are still looking for hope and healing. We are all called to be priests to proclaim the good news for the lost, the marginalized and those being oppressed, right in the middle of the community. We are being placed in different places and circumstances in this fallen and broken world as the Incarnate Jesus. When our lives cross paths with others in this new sense of *Ekklesia*, the Holy Spirit in us will work through us, so that we are blessed and would become blessings to many.

This is not about the ecclesiastic order strategizing the evangelization of the world. This is not about the invading of the spiritual realm onto the secular. This is about the full engagement, the dwelling with, and a full immersion as Jesus came to the world and lived in our midst, and to be a transforming participation and presence among our neighbors.

If we were to go all the way back to the origin of global mission movement set off by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2:2-4) even before the ecclesiastic order was founded and way before the mission societies were launched, we would appreciate the authentic flavor of the *Missio Dei*. Cross-cultural mission did not begin by the church sending out professional evangelists, but by the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of ordinary socio-cultural interactions (Acts 2:5-13) and by Christ-followers moving to different geographic locations and living as witnesses of Christ (Acts 8:1; 11:19). Even the early missionaries Paul and Barnabas were not full-time missionaries in today's sense of the term. They were in fact workplace professionals who stayed in their lanes to continue to carry out their business practice and yet actively engaged in opportunities to share the gospel in the marketplace (Acts 17:17; 18:3; 1 Corinthians 9:6).

This means we may actually help to advance God's Kingdom in and through the daily grind that is my life, and not just through the church's communal life or mission program as it operates in its given community. It is imperative to know that any average person in the pew may be a part of how God's Kingdom works itself out in ordinary life, both on personal level (at home or work), or more corporately (in church life and ministry). We are the instrument of making God's Kingdom to show for itself whenever we proclaim the good news, heal the sick (spiritual and physical healing), and let the Holy Spirit work through us to bring transformation to lives around us. In fact, whenever we are in the midst of people bringing forth the presence in the ministry of Jesus we bring the Kingdom on earth.

The Christendom ecclesiastic model of parish based community is increasingly irrelevant in the 21st century mission context. In a much more connected world via convenient transportation or even on the digital superhighway, the commuter church has replaced local parish communities. Some would even go for a mega-church model that gathers strangers from all corners of a metropolis that rarely share intimate fellowship. It results in an insular approach to church community formation to offer consumer comforts, entertainment, and convenience. Yet, the "love thy neighbors" calling seems to be left by the wayside.

Reaching out to the "neighborhood" is in fact Biblical and Christ-like. It enables people to develop deeper relationship and plant firmer roots in place. And, the local presence is a tangible incarnate practice to embody from which good news and witnesses can be communicated. The focus is not about the extension of the *Ekklesia's* form but to reach people at where they are. The *Ekklesia* will happen when mission is being body forth through the neighborhood – the workplaces and the local communities.

In order to live out this new *Ekklesia*, believers have to be conscious of their identity; their gifting and design (sense of call); their being and doing in their context; as well as their positioning while being in the midst. Because of Jesus' incarnational presence on earth and His death on the cross, those who believe in Him would have a clear identity change. Believers are now "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession," and that they may now "declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light." (1 Pet 2:9-10) This is not just a new identity in the abstract sense. This needs to be an identity with a new *modus operandi* as believers live their lives on earth.

We need to be constantly reminded that we are a people with a new identity. And, this new identity comes with qualitative change in our lives because of the transforming power of Jesus. Oftentimes Christians are contented to live in a patch-up world complacent to be still trapped in the old self and longing for the New Heaven and New Earth to come in the distant future when Jesus comes back again. We are so easily forgetful of the promise in 2 Corinthians 5: 17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here!" The fact is not only that we are already being transformed, but that as we have already received the power of the Holy Spirit we can also bring witness and the transformative power to the rest of the world. (Acts 1:8) The apostles have demonstrated that our faith, when put into action, by the power of the Holy Spirit, can turn the world upside down. With the new identity, we now also live with a new purpose. Or, even more aptly say, the purpose and design that is created in us even before we were born finally finds its expression in this new identity of mine.

To live a vibrant faithful lifestyle, it is not about

impartation of more information or knowledge; or an instruction of methods or techniques of how to be religious. It is about asking believers to be vulnerable and to move outside of their comfort zone. It is also about asking them to take Jesus' teaching by face value and practice what Jesus had done during His earthly ministry. Jesus brought about qualitative change of the lives of those people who had encountered Him. This is about reaching out with our humanity, our natural giftedness as created in the image of God, to impact more lives, to reach out to the needy and the marginalised so that their lives can be transformed as well.

The foundational building block for anyone who desire to live with an engaging faith is the understanding of his or her identity; design and calling. To prepare individual believers to live authentically, and to be effective at wherever they are, they need to ground their identity at the right place and manifested through their being and their doing. The individuals need to re-acquaint with the attributes and personalities of God to learn of their own self-image.⁶ This self-image and identity is closely connected to God's calling for individuals; and have a direct implication on the understanding of *Ekklesia* in our new missional context.

The new understanding of *Ekklesia* has to live beyond the conventional sacred-secular divide. Believers are to make aware that the spiritual is not to stay on the sideline of the secular arena, and to cocoon themselves in their spirituality so that they would not be compromised by the world. Indeed, this might just be a misconceived spirituality if it chooses to be powerless beyond its own realm. Believers need to know that they are being kept in the world for a calling and the strategic reason of their earthly role. They are to engage the world in the new *Ekklesia*, but not belong to the world.

We are saved by grace through faith, and now our presence, our identity and our vocation (being and doing) communicate our redeemed humanity. Paul writes in the Epistle: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph 2:10) This is not just about sharing the spiritual truth through the act of evangelistic outreach program. This calls for a consistent and coherent expression of our redeemed humanity through the different spheres of our lives: our family, our work, our economic activities, artistic expression, and worshipful lifestyle. Bearing witness is not an exclusive church statement through the old ecclesiastic structure. Bearing witness is a holistic expression which should cut through the manifold facets of human activities. It is the consistent and persistent witnessing Sunday to Monday and the rest

of the week through the different life aspects that one may testify to the authenticity of the witness, and hence amplifies the impact permeating through our daily lives, our workplaces, and our communities. This has to be one of the most important values to be communicated through the renewed understanding of *Ekklesia*.

This indeed is a very important segment of the new understanding of *Ekklesia*. The conversation is no longer a conceptual exercise. When the rubber meets the road, this is about burning and expensing one's life with conviction. Work is still work, but for those who understand their calling and purpose and stay in the lane, work is no longer just work anymore as it bears missional and eternal values.

The ultimate positioning of a new *Ekklesia* is when faith and mission has become believers' lifestyle expression. The question to contemplate is how one's faith can be vibrant and alive on Monday to Saturday in both private and corporate settings. Faith is not just to be articulated ecclesologically, but missiologically. When we pray the Lord's prayer and utter the words "Thy Kingdom come" and "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven", we need to actually understand it and mean it. The words have to be more than just mere wishes but guiding lights for us to actually live by. In fact, as called followers of Christ and as the royal priesthood and the holy nations, we are to testify the truthfulness of those claims through our daily lives.

For too long the Christian faith has been tamed in a stagnant *Ekklesia* which finds in many of our local churches and too many has been so content to be just sheep to be fed and to be cared for. Christians look for the comfort of the sheep pen and the gentleness of the shepherd, and even become forgetful of those lost sheep out there in the woods and wilderness. A lot have forgotten the promise of their identity being royal priesthood and holy nations, and empowered by the Holy Spirit and to become potent to bring forgiveness, transformation, life, and hope.

The dynamic expression of an *Ekklesia* is a Christian community being called into mission with equipped and committed followers of Christ ready to step out and to adopt a missional lifestyle to go and proclaim the Jubilee. (Luke 4:19) It is a holistic transformation when redeemed people who live in the midst of the lost with the joy of forgiveness, reconciliation and justice. And, this *Ekklesia* is manifested through any ordinary believers who are willing to reach out and touch people in their own context. The sending is not just the calling for a selected few. And, apparently, this is not just about the charge to foster spiritual change. Just like what they would do in their own hometown or neighborhood, such *Ekklesia* becomes a dynamic, engaging community of believers who are not afraid of venturing out into the world and bringing the battle to the kingdom of darkness until they bring holistic transformation to the people they reach out to, from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria to the end of the world.

6. Business as Mission Global Think Tank. "Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done ... In Business" Issue Group Report: Biblical Models of Transformation Through Business Practices Report, October 2013, bamthinktank.org accessed <http://bamglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/BMTT-IG-Biblical-Models-Final-Report-October-2013.pdf>.

***Ekklesia* an Incarnational witness**

A few examples of these fresh expressions of *ekklesia* may help us discover what this looks like today. Recently, through one of our cohorts in the Philippines, Rei Crizaldo shared on Holistic Integral Mission about a coffee shop business run by Pastor Ian de Ocampo that emerged as a new form of church that is making quite an impact.⁷ Crizaldo also shared about Hybrid churches using digital mediums to worship.⁸ He states, “‘hybridity’ promises to bring the church to a more integral mission or a stronger holistic ministry of God’s people.”

In other more traditional settings, people have been experimenting with new forms of faith communities for a few decades. Fresh Expressions is a network, mostly within historic traditional church structures and denominations, trying *ekklesia* via special interest gatherings: bike clubs, musical hubs, reading clubs, etc.⁹

David Dayalan, from our team, starting using hybrid forms of church several years ago as the political environment became more challenging. The local government started putting pressure on business owners so their church rental property jumped drastically. As David and his team saw what was happening in their country, they shifted to house groups and today by and large meet in homes across their city.

Jason Tan, on the team here, was inspired by Discovery Bible Studies through one of our A3 modules. During the pandemic, he started training members in his community to launch these studies and today over 130 different forms of *ekklesia* have spawned. Nearly half of them joined a denomination and the hybrid nature of these expressions is exciting to watch unfold.

Over the past few years, Elliott on our team, has led an *ekklesia* community group in his home alongside of attending a traditional church. They gather for worship, body life encouragement and equipping and share about how God is working in their places of influence.

For many years, David Wendorff on our team has led weekly gatherings in his home where people gather to share life, witness and testimony plus have creative discussions about theology. Similar to what Elliott is doing, they experience life together and inspire one another for witness in the workplace. Beyond this, David sees his daily life and experience as a form of *ekklesia*. No matter where he is, he tries to embody the Spirit of Christ and employ the gifts God has given him to ‘be the church’ to those around him.

David Lim lays out an initial theological framework in his studies on House Church Movements. He

reveals a framework that involved the following practical expressions of body life that are worthy of further exploration, especially as the creativity of *ekklesia* communities expands. He notes the functions of reproduction, production and simple religiosity.¹⁰

EKKLESIA AS A PRAYING AND WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

Implications for the Global Church Today

Ekklesia or the church today has a wide variety of expressions. No longer should we primarily say church is that place on the corner down the street where people gather on Sunday. Rather, the church is the body of Christ in the fullness of its presence. Whether people gather in a building down the street, start a pop up coffee shop as a mission outpost that becomes a church or *ekklesia*, or generate communities of faith in the workplace, all have their place in serving the Great Commission advance.

As the body of Christ manifests itself in this post-covid world, the creativity of God’s people living out our faith is inspiring. We are eager to learn together so please share with us the various expressions of *ekklesia* that you are practicing or experimenting with. As we learn from one another, we will be better able to equip leaders (pastors, marketplace leaders, educational professionals, medical professionals, etc.) to shepherd the forms so that the Church can flourish and grow in embodying the faith and expanding the kingdom of God.

10. Lim, David “God’s Kingdom as Oikos Church Networks: A Biblical Theology.” *International Journal of Frontier Mission* 34.1-4 (January-December 2017): 25-35.



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Members of the A3 *Ekklesia* task force include: Rev. Dr. Jason Tan (from the Philippines), Dr. Francis Tsui (from Hong Kong), Rev. David Dayalan (from India), Thilini De Visser Kodikara (from Sri Lanka), David Wendorff, Elliott Snuggs and Rev. Joseph W. Handley, Jr., Ph.D. (all from the U.S.)

7. Pastor Ian de Ocampo’s faith community expression: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qggqNe0gqrB20LxkKFdb3ZuoHQ3ZhOSr5/view>

8. Half meant: Hybrid X Holistic Churches: <https://xgenesisrei.tumblr.com/post/706168697428049920/hybrid-x-holistic-churches>

9. Moynagh, Michael. *Church for Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice*. SCM Press, 2012.