

The Church

Community: The Living Church

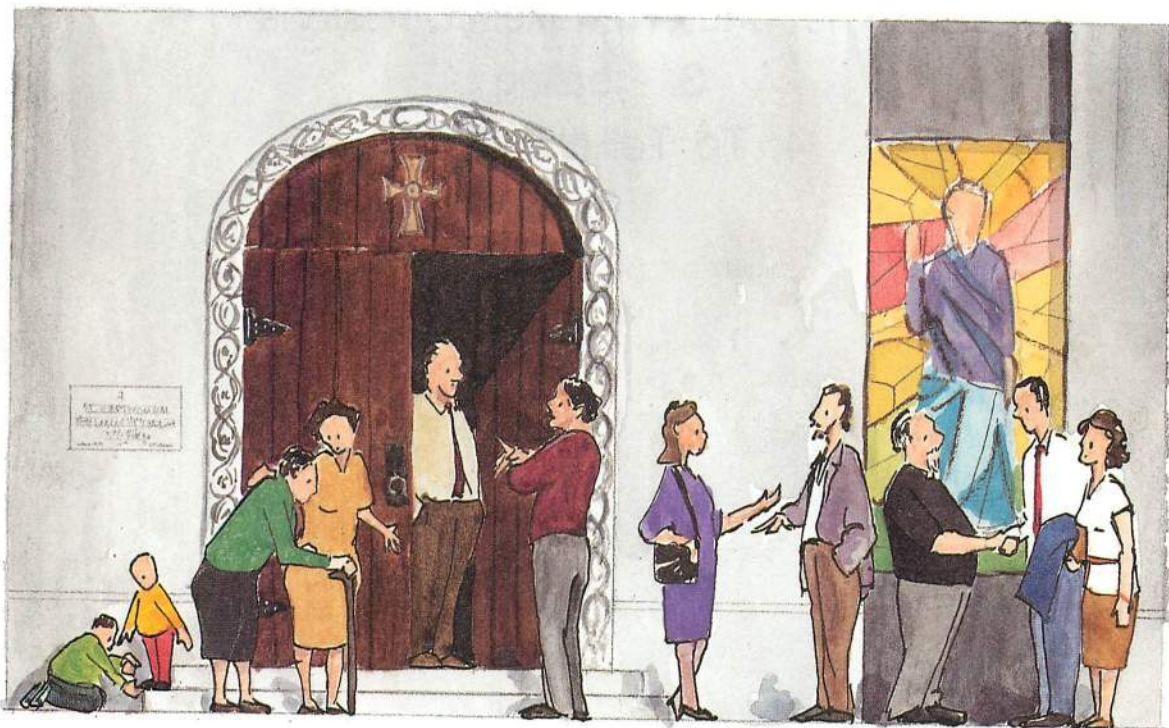
Have you ever tried to imagine what it was like to be a Christian during the first generation after Jesus' death? Have you ever thought of sitting down to a meal with Peter, James, and the other apostles, and after the meal listening to them recall the words of Jesus Christ in vivid detail?

The last part of the second chapter of Acts simply describes the early Christian community. It says that "they were faithful to the teachings of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of the bread, and prayer . . . They also lived together and shared everything in common; they sold their goods and posses-

sions and shared the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed . . . They shared their food gladly and generously and were looked up to by everyone . . ."

But it was not enough to be faithful to a remembered message. Jesus told his followers that faithfulness to one another was faithfulness to him. So they prized their own faithfulness to the brotherhood, to all men and women who shared their convictions and belief that Jesus was the Lord. A shared life of prayer, good deeds and acts of charity, all reflected the early Christian community of believers.

Their community was a special one, different



from others that existed because the main purpose of their gathering was to keep alive the message of salvation given to us by Jesus the Lord; from the very beginning the church was a community of others, a people dedicated to the spiritual and material needs of all, always keeping alive their "oneness," the faith which

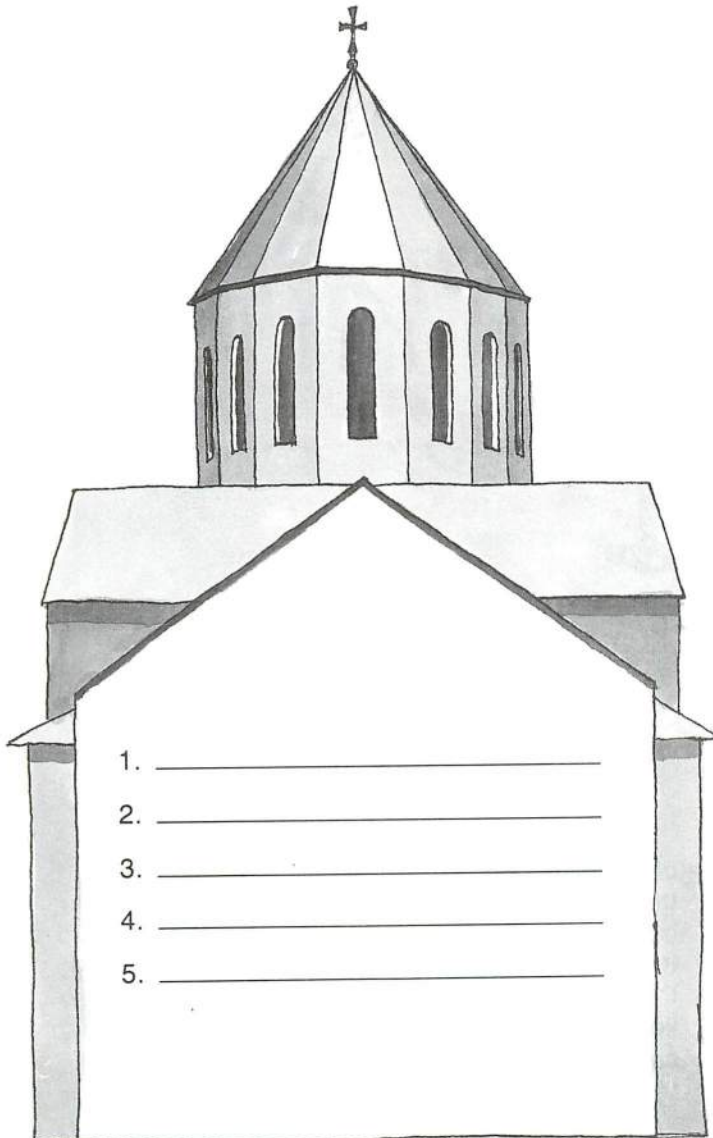
kept them together.

The purpose of the church is the same today as it was then. It is to share the message of Jesus with the world, both by its preaching and inner life, to express a common faith taught by Christ, preached by the apostles, and lived by the saints.

What Is the Church?

From the brief description of the early Christian community which you just read, list five one-word descriptions of your understanding of the Church.

The Church is:



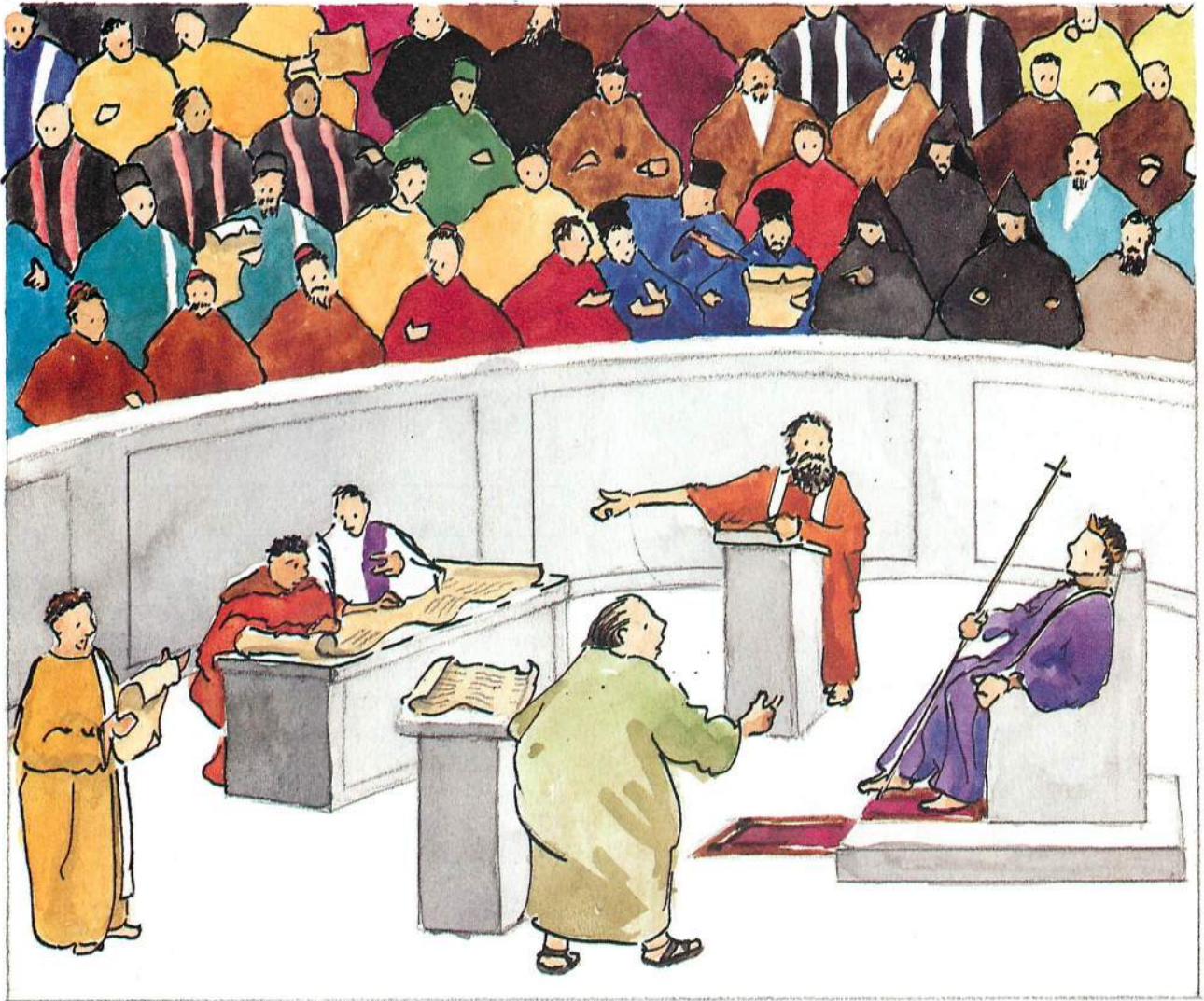
- Now share your descriptions with each other.
 - Do the same with the following scriptural references: Matthew 26:26; Romans 12:5; I Corinthians 12:12-28.
 - Now list five one-word descriptions of the Church as found in the Scriptures.
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The people who lived when the Church was newly born were courageous and expressed their faith not only by the way they lived, but also in the formal proclamation of their faith in a statement which we still use in the church today. This is called the Nicene Creed.

The Community Becomes Divided

During the time the early Christians were thinking of how to express their ideas of the "new faith," there was a young deacon who did not hold the same understanding and opposed the faith of the community. His name was Arius and he lived in the city of Alexandria in Egypt. This city was a great center of Christian learning where, daily, converts were brought into the growing household of Christ.

Arius questioned how the Church was to understand who Jesus Christ was. He believed that since Christ was called the "Son of God," he was created and not actually God himself. His opinion disturbed the leaders of the Christian community and its members who believed that Christ was the human appearance of God. The Church believed that God who is "pure



spirit" became man and took on our "fleshy body," uniting the two together in the person of Jesus Christ. But Arius said no, and looked for a "logical" answer to a question which was beyond the limits of human explanation. Christ, the mystery of God become man, was the answer, but Arius found it difficult to accept.

Many members of the Christian community

believed as Arius did and created a division in the Church. Because Arius' interpretation caused this problem, a special meeting of all the bishops of the church was held to defend the faith and set down in words what was believed. The Armenian Church also was represented at this meeting which was to become the first ecumenical council.

Today the Armenian Church Still Proclaims the True Faith

Despite the efforts of Arius, the Armenian and other Christian peoples still hold the faith as expressed by the early Christian community, that Christ was God with us! We say, "We Believe" or "HAVADAMK," and share in the universal faith. We teach that our church is ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC, APOSTOLIC, but what do we mean?

The Armenian Church is ONE — meaning united with other Orthodox Churches in matters of faith.

The Armenian Church is HOLY — meaning that

the ministry of its leaders is inspired by the HOLY SPIRIT.

The Armenian Church is CATHOLIC — meaning universal, in that we do not consider our church separated in any sense from the churches of other peoples.

The Armenian Church is APOSTOLIC — meaning that it was founded by the apostles Saint Thaddeus and Saint Bartholomew, and that as APOSTOLIC it must also be a missionary church reaching out to everyone who seeks Christ.

Coming to Terms

One	Mi	Church	Yegeghetsi
Holy	Soorp	Faith	Havadk
We Believe	Havadamk	Apostolic	Arakelagan
Catholic	Untanragan	Confession of Faith	Tavanank
Body	Marmin		



Unit I: The Bible

Session 1—The Church

Key Concepts

1. The Church is the Body of Christ—the believing community.
2. The Church identifies herself as being one, holy, catholic (universal), and apostolic.
3. The Church is the believing community expressing the oneness or unity of faith in various cultural expressions and languages.

Objectives

Students will

1. Define the term “church” and explain the church in terms of believing community.
3. Cite statements from the New Testament explaining the church as one body in Christ.
4. Identify the expression, “we believe,” as expressed in various cultures and languages.

Background for Teacher

Very often we use expressions concerning our faith and don't fully understand what they mean and the impact they have on our lives as Christians. We say we belong to a church, but what does that term “church” mean?

In examining the writings of the New Testament we learn the early community of believers in Jesus Christ and his teachings understood themselves to be part of *one body* or group accepting the Christian way, understanding God's laws and teachings, without any variances or disagreement with each other.

Those who were part of this special family gathered together weekly to hear the word of God and share in the Divine Mystery of Christ's presence in the bread and wine.

The Greek word at that time used to describe this special community, this one body of believers, was *ecclesia*, which when translated meant those who were “called to come together to experience Christ's presence.” As Christ himself said, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am also present.” (Matthew 18:20)

The Armenian word to describe this gathering is similar to the original Greek word. “Ecclesia” became “Yegeghetsi.”

Thus, we have the Armenian word for church, yegeghetsi, meaning “of or pertaining to those who were called to come together.”

The body of Christ, the *Yegeghetsi*, goes beyond

any geographical boundary, beyond the limits of any structure or building. It is more than just prayer and more than Scripture. The Church is the people, the living community of believers, expressing Christ's presence in every word, in every action transforming the world in which we live into the kingdom of God which is at hand.

Of course, as the body of Christ, the Church gradually grew in membership; individuals' unity of belief and faith very often met with the obstacle of re-interpretation. This created the need to formally write down exactly what the believing community agreed that their faith expressed.

In the year 325 A.D. the church was called together in the city of Nicaea to prepare a document which until now has remained the church's official written statement of what we believe. There, some 318 bishops met and finally produced the creed or belief of the Church. Consequently, it has been called the Nicene Creed.

The Church of the Armenians (*Hayasdanyaytz Yegeghetsi*) was represented at this meeting in 325 A.D. This gathering was the first ecumenical council. St. Gregory the Illuminator, the first Catholicos of the Church in Armenia, sent his son Aristakes as his representative and eventual successor. He returned to Armenia with this new document of faith, the Nicene Creed, which Armenian Christians immediately began to use. This creed not only contained the total faith of the Christian Church but also became a symbol of unity, uniting all Christians everywhere regardless of national origin. This was emphasized in the phrase *One, Holy, Catholic (universal) and Apostolic Church*.

This is why today, by endorsing this creed, the Armenian Church participates in the unity of the universal Christian Church expressing the oneness of belief in Christ: that he is the Incarnate God, the human, visible manifestation of the invisible God, born of the Blessed Virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit, in order to save us from the eternal death of sin and separation from God.

Materials Needed

- R.S.V. Bibles
- The Nicene Creed tract published by the AACCA (one for each student)

Procedure

1. Welcome students and introduce yourself; then ask them for their names. Impress upon them that even though they are of different families, as Christians they are part of a special community called

together to experience the presence of Christ in their personal lives.

2. Begin the class with the prayer, reading in unison, "We believe in One God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible." (5 min.)

3. Ask students: "What is the Church?" Allow them to brainstorm and give their answers and list them on the blackboard. They can take notes in their texts on page 7. (5 min.)

4. Have students open their Bibles to the New Testament and ask them to read the following scriptural passages to themselves. See text for further instructions.

- Matthew 26:26
- Romans 12:5
- I Corinthians 12:12-28

(All should use the same biblical text, preferably the Revised Standard Version.) (10 min.)

5. Now ask them to compare these scriptural passages with their brainstorm answers. Discuss, incorporating questions below.

Sample Questions and Possible Answers

Q—What does being a member of one body mean?

A—Being part of the same group of people, all belonging to the same family, being united in thought but being unique and separate individuals. (Romans 12:5)

Q—What makes us members of the body of Christ?

A—By receiving his mystical body in Holy Communion. (Matthew 26:26) By being united to one another when we share together his body and blood. (Romans 12:5)

Q—How can the Church, which is made up of many members, be one body? What and who makes them one?

A—The Church, the many believers, by sharing the same faith are part of the one body. Sharing Christ makes them one. (I Corinthians 12:12-27)

Q—Is the Church only worship, good will, or a building?

A—No. The Church is the believing community in Jesus Christ. (15 min.)

6. Distribute the Nicene Creed tracts and have students read through the entire creed. Ask them to list three statements that are conveyed in this proclamation of faith expressing "community." Here are some examples:

- We believe as a community that God is one.
- We believe that the Holy Spirit lives in the community of believers by inspiring the prophets of Old Testament times, the apostles of Christ, the saints and us.
- We believe that as a community we must be baptized into Christ.
- We believe that as a community of Christians, through repentance our sins will be forgiven. (10 min.)

7. Review with the students the terms in English and Armenian: One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, (*Mi*, pronounced "mee," *Soorp*, *Untanragan*, *Arakelagan*).

a. The Armenian Church is *one*, meaning united with other orthodox churches in matters of faith.

b. The Armenian Church is *holy*, meaning that the ministry of its leaders and members is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

c. The Armenian Church is *catholic**, meaning universal, in that we do not consider our church separated in any sense from the churches of other people. Universally we express the same faith in Christ. (* Note: The term CATHOLIC should not be confused with the Roman Catholic Church.)

d. The Armenian Church is *apostolic*, meaning that it was founded through the efforts of the apostles, and also that as *apostolic* it must always be a missionary church reaching out to everyone who seeks Christ as his/her savior. (10 min.)

8. *On-going class assignment*

This assignment can be completed over the next few lessons. (5 min.)

a. Reinforce the idea that the Church's creed came about by the collective efforts of bishops from various cultural backgrounds and nations, the Armenians being one of them. Assign the students to compile a list of 15 different ways to say "We Believe" in foreign languages. Examples—Havadamk: Armenian; Pistevo:Greek; Veroyoo:Russian; Credo:Latin.)

b. Take another look at *The Nicene Creed* and have students read the tract, including the historical commentary and "some important ideas to remember."

The following are Armenian terms the students should come to know in the study of the creed. You may quiz them occasionally in subsequent classes.

- We believe—Havadamk
- One—Mi
- Holy—Soorp
- Catholic—Untanragan
- Apostolic—Arakelagan
- Church—Yegeghetsi
- Faith—Havadk

9. *Homework*: In addition to the above, assign the reading of this week's and next week's lesson.

Session 2—The Church Makes Decisions

Key Concepts

1. The early Church had to resolve the problems of a new and growing faith.
2. Every decision of the world Church is arrived at through prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
3. King Drtad and St. Gregory brought Armenians to Christianity and a long-sought unity.