

From ancient to modern worlds

The spaces in which we gather have significant effects on the nature of our meetings. A Christian group that meets in a hired public space is likely to be organised differently to one that meets in its own parish church. They are limited by the permanent features of a building but able to adapt other aspects for new purposes. Space is not only a measurement of size. It is related to cultural structures through its location, design and decoration. The ‘cultural form’ that a group adopts through its use of space sends powerful messages to its own members and to others (Cameron 2010).

Christian groups are increasingly using spaces other than traditional church buildings in order to engage with non-Christians ‘where they are’. The Fresh Expressions movement in UK Anglican and Methodist circles is one example of this practice. A Fresh Expression is ‘a form of church for our changing culture, established primarily for the benefit of people who are not yet members of any church.’ (Anglican-Methodist Working Party 2012).



The Christian communities behind the texts of the New Testament did not yet meet in dedicated church buildings. Instead, they met mainly in their members’ houses. For modern Christian groups reflecting on their own ministries, it can be useful to consider how meeting spaces affected churches in the past as well as in the present.



Activity aims

Each session in this download draws upon the different buildings found at Pompeii to help you explore how different meeting spaces can affect group behaviours and identities—both in the past and in the present. The key question is: *How might an understanding of ancient Christian meetings inform expressions of church today?*

A church in the elite house

The session 'A church in the elite house' introduced you to the houses owned by the highest strata of Roman society. We looked to the House of the Menander at Pompeii as an example of such a dwelling and considered how 1 Corinthians 11:17–22 might be heard by a group meeting in such a place. Many Christian groups still meet in houses today. We could compare how the same text from 1 Corinthians would be understood and used by a modern Christian group in a comparable setting.



Example modern church



Imagine a church meeting in the home of a wealthy member, using its large lounge, entrance hallway and kitchen.

Questions

- ▶ What similarities and differences are there with the elite Roman house? Consider size, social conventions and features that convey status.
- ▶ How might the various spaces in this modern home affect people in the group? Consider people from various types of social situation.
- ▶ How would members of the group interpret the issues of 1 Cor 11:17–34 if they were using this kind of space to share meals that they considered as being celebrations of the Lord's Supper?
- ▶ How might they understand Paul's instructions in 1 Cor 11:23–34?
- ▶ How might meeting in the house of a wealthy member be likely to affect the nature of the group?
- ▶ To what extent can reflection on issues that faced first-century Christians meeting in large houses help in thinking about issues faced by Christian groups meeting in houses today?

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