

# Ten marks of the church-as-abbey



Models for how we should do church are not in short supply. Seeker-sensitive, purpose-driven, emerging, missional, traditional, liturgical, ancient-future, and the like all have their merits. I am really interested in the *church-as-abbey* concept myself. I have read extensively about the early Celtic Christian church and find it intriguing and encouraging. In that research I identified 10 characteristics of the church-as-abbey, as I call it, or abbey church, for short. Here are the essential characteristics, or marks, of what I mean when I use the term *church-as-abbey*:

1. **Worship.** The *church-as-abbey* has at its heart the practice of worship. But worship that is public, powerful, and brings one into the presence of God through some type of intentional liturgy, whether formal or not. But not every parishioner of the abbey will attend every service. The idea is not to get everyone to one service, but to provide opportunities for worship that abbey adherents can participate in regularly, if not weekly.
2. **Arts.** The church-as-abbey celebrates creativity as a gift from a creative God. The arts reflect our connection to creation and God's creative power. The arts are expression, statement, witness, and beauty for a world that needs all of those things.
3. **Hospitality.** The Celtic abbey was open to all who needed its hospitality and help. Monks, even those fasting, would interrupt their discipline to greet and welcome those who came into the abbey's confines. Welcoming the stranger is a vital part of the abbey's ministry.
4. **Economics.** The abbeys were self-supporting, engaged in cultivating fields, raising livestock, operating public markets, and giving employment opportunities to the community. I read about a church the other day that also operates a farmers' market and has been doing so for years. I am exploring the agrarian movement, particularly as it attracts followers of Christ. More on that later.
5. **Learning and scholarship.** The Celtic monasteries became the centers of learning, preservation of sacred and literary manuscripts, and schools of instruction. The amazing Book of Kells is the prime example. See [\*How the Irish Saved Civilization\*](#) for other examples.

6. **Catechesis and spiritual direction.** For new converts, the abbey provided initial instruction. For more mature converts, the abbot or abbess provided spiritual direction and aided in spiritual formation.
7. **Rule of life in community.** The Rule of St. Benedict is the most famous of these “rules of life” but there were many others that defined the monastic community’s social and spiritual interaction.
8. **Ministry to the marginalized.** The poor, hungry, disenfranchised, sick, old, and disabled found help of various kinds within the abbey’s compound.
9. **Peace and justice.** St. Patrick was the first person in recorded history to speak out against the Irish slave trade. Patrick’s appeals eventually resulted in the end of the Irish slave trade, of which Patrick himself had been a victim. Patrick also prevailed upon the Irish kings and warlords to live in peace with one another, as much as they were able. The abbey bears that same responsibility today.
10. **External missions.** Celtic priests, including some of the well-known figures such as Columba and Aidan, went on extended “missions” to areas removed from the abbey. In a reimagination of this practice, the missional church-as-abbey establishes external groups but groups with ties to the abbey church. This is the area that I believe is a core part of the abbey concept. These groups are not “missions” in the sense of international missions, but rather are groups that are “distant” from the abbey or regionally based either in travel, culture, or status, but that have a connection to the abbey as “mother church.”

But, you say, “Where is evangelism, ministry, and education — those staples of the church as we know it today?” The 10 marks of the abbey church above contain evangelism, ministry, and education, but from a new perspective. George Hunter, in his intriguing book, [\*The Celtic Way of Evangelism\*](#), says that in the Celtic Christian abbey “belonging” came before “believing.” Prospective converts were incorporated into the community before they became believers in Christ. Not a bad model for us today, which is one of the main reasons I like the abbey approach.

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