

IS THE HOUSE CHURCH A PATTERN FOR TODAY?

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The decline of the traditional church in the West has met with the re-emergence of alternative ways of being the people of God. One of these is the phenomenal global growth of house churches—small groups of committed Christians meeting mostly in private residences and spawning new cells. House churches are part of a larger modern movement, a revival of interest in home-related Christian groups. Researchers have identified five distinguishable types of Christian house groups on the contemporary scene: the traditional home Bible study, home fellowship groups, home cell groups, base-satellite units, and house churches.¹ Without a doubt, house churches are the most controversial and have created the most interest and enthusiasm. While the house church movement is still small in most Western nations, it is likely to become a major player in the church of the future.

In North America, until recently, the concept of “house churches” was relegated to the back burner in the church world. Home-based churches were seen as a two-thirds world phenomenon, as one of the major ways the Lord of harvest was expanding his Church in other parts of the globe, particularly in restricted access nations.² They were viewed as legitimate vehicles of protest in communist and Muslim lands in reaction to political repression and the persecution of totalitarian regimes.³ In the United States and Canada, house-churches were more often identified with the counter-culture rejection of the institutional church, as exemplified by the Jesus People movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Home church proponents were painted as “disgruntled” Christians who pulled out of established churches, their groups seen as quickly becoming in-grown. Since the 1990s, the ascendant mode of conservative American faith has been the megachurch. But now religious researchers are observing a new trend: a growing number of North American Christians are abandoning traditional congregations for a burgeoning movement becoming known in evangelical circles as “simple church.”

¹ C. Kirk Hadaway, Francis M. Dubose, and Stuart A. Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 12–14, 79–112.

² China is a great example, with some estimates of more than 90 million “underground” Christians meeting weekly in house churches. The rapid expansion of the house church (HC) movement in China is the fulfillment of what John Nevius recommended in his call for self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting churches (John Nevius, *The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches* [Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958]). For other nations with growing HC movements today see David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIG Take Resources, 2004) and Rad Zdero, *The Global House Church Movement* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2004), 69–74. For more on the earlier emergence of HCs in non-Western nations in the modern period, see Hadaway, Dubose, & Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, 14–22, 51–54.

³ For more on the twentieth-century rise of HCs as “protest” movements because more visible churches are illegal or discouraged, see Hadaway, Dubose, and Wright, 22–25.

This growing popularity of house churches has caught the attention of both the secular and religious media. The *New York Times* was one of the first to observe the trend. In 2001 it reported, “A growing number of Christians across the country are choosing a do-it-yourself working experience in what they call a ‘house church.’”⁴ Newsweek noted it as one of the top religious trends for 2006⁵ and NBC news did a television segment on the house church phenomena.⁶ In a lead 2006 religious story entitled, “There’s No Pulpit Like Home,” *Time* magazine noted, “Some evangelicals are abandoning megachurches for minichurches—based in their own living rooms.”⁷ In a controversial new book, entitled *Revolution*, George Barna, Evangelicalism’s best-known pollster, named simple church as one of several “mini-movements”⁸ vacuuming up “millions of believers [who] have stopped going to [standard] church.” Amazingly, Barna claims that some 20 million American evangelicals, whom he dubs “Revolutionaries,” see traditional local churches as optional—and yet passionately pursue a “24/7” Christian faith. His research indicates that in a typical week, 9 percent of all U.S. adults participate in a house church. Barna boldly predicts that in two decades “only about one-third of the population” will rely on conventional congregations “as the primary or exclusive means for experiencing and expressing their faith.”⁹

That simpler forms of church are picking up steam in North America, is evident by the growing number of house churches being reported. A few years ago, global house church trends-watcher Wolfgang Simpson estimated there were over five-thousand home-based churches in North America.¹⁰ By 2005 Barna researcher Thom Black was claiming that one million people were involved in these simple forms of church.¹¹ The Center for Mission Research (CMR), run by the Southern Baptists, estimates that about

⁴ Quoted in Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), 171.

⁵ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10696190/site/newsweek>. Accessed 12/22/06.

⁶ <http://video.msn.com/v/us/v.htm?g=bcd59695-b489-4d7b-9487-a94e82dcc9e0&f>. Accessed 12/22/06.

⁷ Rita Healy and David Van Biema, “There’s No Pulpit Like Home,” *TIME*, 6 March 2006, <<http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1167737,00.html>> (accessed 19 June 2006).

⁸ According to Barna, other “mini-movements” and “micro-models” attracting Revolutionaries are home schooling, Bible studies at work, independent worship events, spiritual disciplines networks, Christian creative arts guilds, internet faith-based groups, marketplace ministries, and other forms of “personal church.” The two fastest-growing models, according to Barna, are the HC and cyberchurch (George Barna, *Revolution* [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2005], 54, 64–66).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13, 49, 53–54, 64–66. See also the 10/24/05, 6/19/06, and 1/8/07 Barna Group Updates on his website (www.barna.org). In a more recent 1/8/2007 Barna update entitled, “House Churches are More Satisfying to Attenders Than Are Conventional Churches” (<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=255> accessed 1/9/07), Barna states that “The rapid growth in house church activity is evident in the fact that half of the people (54%) currently engaged in an independent home fellowship have participated for less than three months. In total, three out of every four house church participants (75%) have been active in their current gathering for a year or less.” This report, based on national surveys conducted in August and October 2006, seems to indicate significant growth in American house church attendance in 2006.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Simpson, “5,000 House Churches Planted so Far,” *The Friday Fax 2005 #19*, <<http://www.jesus.org.uk/dawn/2005/dawn19.html>> (accessed 19 June 2006). “The number of house churches in the USA has probably doubled in the past 18 months, from 2,500 to 5,000.” This information was shared at an April 2005 symposium organized by Church Multiplication Associations (CMA) (*ibid.*).

¹¹ Cited by Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 172.

four million Americans do not attend an organized church, synagogue or mosque but find their primary place of spiritual training in some form of small home group or “alternative faith community.”¹² Mike Steele, North American director of DAWN Ministry, a prominent saturation church planting agency which stresses a house church strategy, claims to identify at least 150 networks of house churches across North America.¹³ A Google search of “house church” pulls up dozens of national and international groups promoting the idea. Most were started within the last ten years.¹⁴ Since this newest emphasis on the house church started in the late 1990s, much of the growing body of literature concerning the movement is available only on the Internet. (See Appendix A for a list of major web-based resources.) Numerous North American evangelical authors and resource agencies are now recognizing and recommending the house church model.¹⁵

All of this attention has caused major denominations and mission agencies to seriously consider house church planting as a valid approach for doing twenty-first century missions. The Southern Baptist Convention with its International Mission Board has been actively planting house churches and cell groups, and as a result, is seeing church planting movements take place among numerous people groups in Asia and Latin America.¹⁶ Other evangelical mission organizations are refocusing on back-to-basics churches in their overseas efforts. Campus Crusade for Christ has been planting “home fellowship groups” for years in various parts of the world.¹⁷ Youth with a Mission has also made this a major thrust.¹⁸ DAWN (Discipling A Whole Nation) has a lofty global goal: to provide “an evangelical [house] congregation for every village and neighborhood of every class, kind and condition of people” in the whole world by saturation church planting.¹⁹

¹² <http://www.namb.net/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=9qKILUOzEpH&b=2027651&ct=3318> accessed 12/22/06.

¹³ DAWN North America, <<http://www.dawnministries.org/globalministries/northamerica/home.htm>> (accessed 19 June 2006).

¹⁴ For example, the international House Church Network, which began in 1998, maintains a registry that lists 97 such networks in California alone (2005). For Canada, see The Canadian House Church Network, <www.housechurchcanada.ca> or <www.outreach.ca/cpc/housechurches.htm> (accessed 19 June 2006).

¹⁵ The recent interest of mainline evangelicalism in the HC movement/model is evidenced by the publication of Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003) and Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005). Other well-known American HC writer/advocates include Tony Dale, Felicity Dale, Dick Scoggins, Steve Atkerson, Robert Banks, Del Birkey, Gene Edwards, Frank Viola, Nate Krupp, Jim Rutz, Larry Kreider, David Garrison, George Patterson, Jim Montgomery, Robert Fitts, and Neil Cole. Canadian leaders include Rad Zdero and Grace Wiebe.

¹⁶ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board of Southern Baptist Convention, 1999) and David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIG Take Resources, 2004).

¹⁷ Robert Fitts, *The Church in the House: A Return to Simplicity*, <http://www.robertfitts.com/HTML_books/The%20Church%20in%20the%20House.htm> (accessed 20 March 2006).

¹⁸ YWAM Church Planting Coaches, <<http://www.cpcaches.com/index.htm>> (accessed 19 June 2006).

¹⁹ Jim Montgomery, *DAWN 2000: 7 Million Churches to Go* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1989), 12. In North America DAWN’s announced goal is to plant 4 million simple churches in North America by the year 2018 (Joel New International—e-zine 541, 7 March 2006).

Sensing what God has done overseas, North American denominational leaders are beginning to incorporate this model in their missional strategies at home. The Southern Baptist's North American Mission Board has commissioned its Church-Planting Group to adopt a "New Testament church planting movement among all people groups in the United States, U.S. territories, and Canada." Their website indicates that "house churching" is now a component of their multi-faceted strategy.²⁰ In Canada groups such as the Free Methodists and Foursquare Gospel are sponsoring house church planting efforts.²¹ Other evangelical groups are carefully watching these efforts and wondering how fruitful or lasting lay-led churches without buildings will be in North American settings. David Garrison, probably the leading global researcher on Church Planting Movements—which are characterized by house and cell churches—asks, on behalf of many denominational and mission leaders, "Can Church Planting Movements emerge in 21st century North America?"²²

Within evangelical circles there seems to be a growing anticipation that this expression of church will lead to a fresh move of the Holy Spirit in North America.²³ Some enthusiasts are going so far as to call for a "third reformation" that will restore NT church structure:

In rediscovering the gospel of salvation by faith and grace alone, Luther started to reform the church through a *reformation of theology*. In the eighteenth century, through movements in the pietistic renewal, there was a recovery of a new intimacy with God, which led to a *reformation of spirituality*, the Second Reformation. Now God is touching the wineskins themselves, initiating a Third Reformation, a *reformation of structure*.²⁴

In light of all this resurgent interest in the house church, there is an urgent need for evaluation. It is imperative that we assess the house church in the light of Scripture, not just from our denominational history, traditions or current polling data. Too many church and mission leaders are implementing household church models without much prior thought, and too many others are resisting them because of fear of change. Objective analysis is vital to understand both the strengths and weaknesses of the simple church approach. Is the home church simply a fad, the latest bandwagon on which to climb? Or is it, as many are claiming, nothing less than original Christianity? In this article, I intend to find the answers. After carefully defining the house church and looking at its biblical/theological basis, I will seek to demonstrate both the advantages and disadvantages of this model particularly in North American settings. I will then conclude with

²⁰ North American Mission Board, <<http://www.namb.net/>> (accessed 19 June 2006).

²¹ The Free Methodist Church in Canada, <<http://www.fmc-canada.org/>> (accessed 19 June 2006) and Foursquare Gospel Church of Canada, <<http://www.foursquare.ca/hbcn.htm>> (accessed 19 June 2006).

²² Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World*, 168. Garrison has identified "ten universal elements" found in every CPM. From his global research on several continents he found that "small fellowships of believers meeting in natural settings such as homes or their equivalent" were a "key element" (Ibid., 191).

²³ See, for example, Dick Scoggins, *Handbook for House Churches*, <<http://www.dickscoggins.com/books/handbook.php>> (accessed 19 June 2006).

²⁴ Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World: The Return of the House Churches* (Waynesboro, CA: OM Publishing [Paternoster Publishing], 1998), xvi.

some major lessons which all church leaders can learn from the house church movement. My basic premise is that *any move to minimize the complexity of church forms in order to maximize the effectiveness of clear biblical functions is healthy and should be welcomed*. The return to simpler forms of church holds great promise for the future growth of the North American church.

DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION: WHAT IS A HOUSE CHURCH?

The term “house church” refers to an indigenous and self-functioning church small enough to gather in a home or similar surrounding. House churches may be defined as biblical churches that meet primarily in homes and have generally fewer than thirty members²⁵ and normally unpaid lay leaders. Robert and Julia Banks observe, “House churching involves face-to-face meetings of adults and children who are committed to developing a common life in Christ.”²⁶ Unlike many traditional church plants, these back-to-basics congregations do not start in a home with the goal of moving later to a larger rented or permanent facility of their own. This church is a church designed to stay in a private residence. No church building, professional clergy, highly polished services, or expensive programs are required nor desired. As it grows, it will seek to multiply—not enlarge.

Not all home churches will meet in a private house residence. If none is available, “simple” churches can meet in condominiums, apartments, coffee shops, restaurants, workplaces, bus or train terminals, meeting rooms on the local university campus, parks, or even in the open air. For this reason, most practitioners prefer to use other terms to describe this kind of church. They dislike “house church” because it signifies real estate and, they loudly protest, “We are not about buildings.” A perusal of the growing body of literature on “house” churches, reveals the following terms growing in current acceptance: *simple church, organic church, koinos church, home church, relational church, participatory church, radical church, family integrated church, age integrated church* and *mosaics*. Grace Wiebe, editor of the Canadian House Church Resource Network’s emailed newsletter, recommends that movement advocates seek to use many different terms interchangeably.

²⁵ The number of people typically involved in a HC differs among researchers and HC proponents. George Barna’s 2006 research found the average size of a house church was 20 people (*House Churches Are More Satisfying* <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=255> accessed 1/9/07). Rad Zdero, writing from a Canadian perspective, says it is wise to keep the number of people to between 6 and 12. From his experience, “groups less than 6 strong tend to dwindle and be lackluster because of the decreased number of relationships and interactions possible. However groups over 12 tend to lose intimacy and every-member participation” (Zdero, *Global House Church Movement*, 94). David Garrison, on the other hand, has found that in rapidly growing church planting movements overseas, HC and or cell groups typically number between 10 and 30 (Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World*, 191, 260, 344). The Xenos Christain Fellowship in Columbus, OH, has up to 60 people in each of their HCs. In China some HCs have 100 persons—but this would no longer be “simple church!” The ultimate size of a HC may be determined by three factors: (1) cultural perceptions (2) space limitations of the meeting place, and (3) one’s HC strategy.

²⁶ Robert Banks and Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 6.

bly, with the understanding that “no one term describes [fully] who we are.”²⁷ Thus, what defines these churches is not location, but emphasis.²⁸

House churches are a sincere attempt to get back to both the form and function of apostolic Christianity. Stated positively, they are fully functioning local churches in themselves with freedom to practice the Lord’s Supper, baptize, marry, bury, exercise biblical discipline, and chart their own course. Most will seek to faithfully live out all the biblically prescribed purposes of a local church: evangelism, worship, teaching, service, fellowship. Their home-sized group meetings are very participatory and interactive with prayer, Bible study, discussion, mentoring, and outreach, as well as food and fun. The House2House website states:

By “simple church,” we mean a way of doing and being church that is so simple that any believer would respond by saying, “I could do that!” By “simple church,” we mean the kind of church that is described in the New Testament. Not constrained by structure but by the needs of the extended family, and a desire to extend the Kingdom of God. By “simple church,” we mean a church that listens to God, follows His leading and obeys His commands. By “simple church,” we mean spiritual parents raising spiritual sons and daughters to establish their own families.²⁹

Most house churches today see the value of networking together in their cities with other similar bodies of like mind in order to prevent instability (via isolation and entropy) as well as to maintain health (doctrinal and behavioral). Occasional city-wide gatherings of all house churches are planned for encouragement, sharing of resources, and celebrative worship. Robert Banks and Julia Banks describe these larger gatherings as “home-church based congregations.”³⁰ These wider gatherings may meet together regularly but not necessarily weekly, often in a large home, community building or public park, reserved just for the occasion. Normally each home group comes with the goal of making some contribution to the edifying of the whole “congregation.” House churches, though often non-denominational today, realize they need to be linked with other clusters of local believers in order to make visible the oneness of the Body of Christ. Their literature shows that they believe this was the common practice of the early church: that in NT times all individual believers and house churches considered themselves as part of a single citywide church and so gathered periodically to express unity.³¹

²⁷ Grace Wiebe, ed., Canadian House Church Resource Network E-newsletter (May 2006).

²⁸ This is why Ed Stetzer, a Southern Baptist researcher, who is not a HC practitioner, prefers the term “koinos church.” *Koinos* is a Greek term used infrequently in Scripture—but seen in Acts 2:44 where the believers had “all things in common.” Thus, “koinos” churches are bodies committed to have “face-to-face relationships in such a way that they truly live life together” (Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 170–71).

²⁹ “What Do We Mean by Simple Church?” <<http://www.house2house.com/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=2>> (accessed 11 March 2006).

³⁰ Banks and Banks, *The Church Comes Home*, 6

³¹ NT texts which speak of larger public gatherings (Acts 2:46; 5:42, etc.) are interpreted by modern HC advocates to be occasional mass get-togethers of all area HC members. As we shall see later these “public” texts may be interpreted differently. For a defense of this citywide church position commonly found among HC leaders (Zdero, *Global House Church Movement*, 49–51), Banks and Banks give two planting models for how HCs can link together (Banks and Banks, *The Church Comes Home*, 136–41).

Distinguishing the House Church

Though they have much in common, the house church is quite different from the widely accepted *cell church*.³² Both are found in Church Planting Movements (CPMs). In a true cell-based church, each cell belongs to a larger system involving a pyramid leadership structure with a senior pastor at the top. His strong teaching ministry cascades down to each cell group leader. Each home cell is a part of the larger church and supports its overall ministry. All the cells come together periodically for a large celebration worship and teaching service. But the shepherding, caring, and accountability is left to the smaller home cells. The cell church is often a megachurch (or meta-church³³) with a strong and visionary leader behind the scenes shepherding the entire movement.

The simple church-in-a-home is also to be distinguished from a *conventional church with a fully functioning small group ministry*. In the traditional church the home prayer or Bible study group is often merely an optional appendage. Furthermore, the traditional congregational small group is often not outreach focused, unlike both house and cell churches. Though there may be several small groups floating around, in the traditional church they are not the main program—the Sunday morning worship service is. Rad Zdero, a Canadian house church leader aptly describes these three classic models of church prevalent today. He sees the *traditional church* as a bicycle wheel hub (Sunday morning large group worship) with the odd spoke (home group) protruding out. It's a church *with* small groups. The *cell church* is like a hub with many spokes jutting outward from it. It's a church *of* small groups. Thus, the *house church*, which normally seeks to become a part of peer networks for health and growth, is like a spider web of interlocking strands. It is best explained by the principle that “church *is* small groups.”³⁴ The sharp contrast in these three approaches to “doing church” can be seen in Appendix B. All three of these classical models are deemed by this writer to be valid expressions of biblical Christianity.

The Diversity of House Churches

Microchurches gather for different reasons and focus on different themes. For this reason, it is technically inaccurate and misleading to speak of the “house church movement.” Movement conveys a unified motion among a group of people. Those attracted to home-style congregations contain every stripe of Christian and represent every doctrinal pedigree. Consequently, there exists no monolithic movement that reflects all home churches. Checking their Internet chat-rooms and websites, one finds a bewildering cor-

³² The original and still primary advocate of the cell church model is Ralph W. Neighbor, Jr. (*Where Do We Go From Here? A Guidebook for the Cell Group Church* [Houston, TX: Touch Outreach Ministries, 1990]). For a good descriptive overview of “The Ten Largest Cell Churches in the World” see the article by the same name in *Cell Group Journal* (Houston, TX [Winter 2001]): 26–30.

³³ For a solid description and overview of the metachurch, see Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1991).

³⁴ Zdero, *Global House Church Movement*, 4. See also see his helpful comparison chart, 127–28. For a helpful discussion of four types of church-based small groups and how they differ from the home church, see Banks and Banks, *Church Comes Home*, 99–108).

nucopia of opinions and positions. Home church leaders debate issues of leadership authority, personal liberty, spiritual gifts, correct church polity and structure, how much organization is needed, scheduling, etc. There is no utopia of consensus and conformity. Frank Viola,³⁵ a veteran house church leader, laments that many of the contemporary groups that fly under the flag of “house church” fit neatly into one of seven categories: the glorified Bible study, the special interest group, the personality cult, the bless-me club, the socially amorphous party, the disgruntled malcontent society, and the unwritten liturgy-driven church!³⁶ (See Appendix C and D for a humorous description of these “subcultures” and of the various “streams” within the “house church movement.”)

Because there are so many expressions of the house church, it is difficult to adequately describe it. Some groups are aberrant and others sound in the faith. Nonetheless, Ed Stetzer, after a thorough review of the current trend, believes there “are committed believers meeting across North America (and the world) worshipping in biblically-balanced and theologically-faithful Koinos churches. Unfortunately, many people lump all Koinos churches in the same category. This is an unfair stereotype.”³⁷ I would agree with Stetzer’s appraisal.

THE CONTEMPORARY APPEAL OF SMALLER CHURCHES

The mentality of modern “churchianity” is often that the bigger the church, the better it must be. More disciples and more dollars are the mark of God’s blessing. A basic assumption behind the church-in-the-house movement is that smaller is better. These churches are intentionally small—and like it that way. Neil Cole, a leader in the “organic church” movement says, “We are now entering the day of the small, and the smaller we go, the bigger our impact on the world can be.”³⁸ Wolfgang Simson agrees, “The church has to become small in order to grow large.”³⁹ Advocates feel they can better focus on building relationships and a sense of community. If the megachurch is the legacy of Baby Boomers, the legacy of the next generations may be just the opposite—the “micro-church.” Smaller churches are designed to meet the need for close-knit, authentic relationships.

I have found that many young church planters today are uninterested in huge churches and expensive facilities. They are turned off by marketing hype and the bigger-is-better mentality they say characterizes many churches today. Because they are more concerned with growing authentic disciples of Christ—not with becoming big—the house church model is quite attractive. This generation of men in ministry seems to value

³⁵ Frank Viola, *So You Want to Start a House Church* (Gainesville: FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 2003), 114–16. Viola observes that many in HC circles assemble for the wrong reasons—they seem to be issue-centered or person-centered, not Christ-centered.

³⁶ In fairness to the HC movement, we must acknowledge that many larger congregations could fit under one of these categories. Obviously, they all fall short of the scriptural idea of church.

³⁷ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 176.

³⁸ Cole, *Organic Church*, 94.

³⁹ Simson, *Houses that Change the World*, xvii.

the intimacy and flexibility of smaller “entrepreneurial” congregations. Not that they see big churches as wrong. Bill Easum, a respected church consultant, believes the trend toward smaller churches is not just a response to the megachurch phenomenon. It means the next generation “cares more about authenticity and community than institutions.”⁴⁰ Authenticity is the watchword among Generation X. Surrounded by friends but feeling alone, detached and distrustful, many of the younger generation are looking for a safe place to connect with God and friends. Smaller relational churches feed this need and therefore may be more effective at reaching the next generation.

The microchurch movement reflects the changing needs of American culture. Under the modernist worldview, which dominated Western thought for several centuries, skepticism toward anything spiritual forced Christians to defend the legitimacy of Christ with logical argumentation and rational sermons. But in the emerging postmodern world, with Gen-Xers at the vanguard, there is less debate about spiritual reality and more concern for authentic spiritual experiences. Postmoderns do not need to be convinced to believe in spirituality—they need relationships to incarnate truth. They find it difficult to separate a relationship with Christ and relationships with other people. Not surprisingly, Christian leaders who are seriously engaged in the postmodern culture will be attracted to “leaner” churches. Many emerging Christian leaders drawn to church planting are looking for a new model—one built on starting churches by building relationships first. Relationships have always been vital in planting a new church—but now they are the strategy *and* the goal! Face-to-face churches have great appeal and potential in a culture that values intimate relationships, shared leadership, transparency, and teamwork.⁴¹

Microchurches may also be healthier churches. For his breakthrough book, *Natural Church Development*, Christian Schwarz conducted a global survey of churches on every continent and discovered seven important characteristics of a healthy church. Among other surprising discoveries, he found that smaller churches are often healthier than the huge megachurches. He writes, “The evangelistic effectiveness of mini-churches is statistically 1,600 percent greater than that of the megachurches!” In their research, his team calculated 170 variables and determined which factors were the most negative in relation to church health and growth. They found large size was the third most negative factor, on par with “liberation theology” and “traditionalism”!⁴² Thus those who plant and/or pastor small healthy churches need not feel inferior. With increasing concern for church health today, smaller churches are becoming more attractive.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR HOUSE CHURCHES

Biblical scholars generally agree that the local church is a gathering of believers, not a set of buildings. In the NT “the word ‘church’ was applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the

⁴⁰ Nicki Reno, “Make Way for the Microchurch!” <<http://www.faithworks.com/archives/microchurch.htm>> (accessed 3 September 2001).

⁴¹ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 170–72.

⁴² Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 46–48.

group of all true believers in the universal church.”⁴³ There are three main uses of “church” (*ekklesia*) in the NT: believers gathering in someone’s home,⁴⁴ the citywide or regional church,⁴⁵ and the universal church.⁴⁶ The word is *never* used in reference to a special building or a religious ceremony. This would have been incomprehensible to the early Jesus movement. *Ekklesia* brings out the importance of clustering, assembling, or meeting together as believers.

The Scriptures do indicate that common ordinary dwellings were used for spreading the gospel and for discipling new converts both during Jesus’ lifetime as well as during the expansion of the early church in the book of Acts. In the Gospels, for example, we see that homes—among other places—were a *natural* part of Jesus’ life and ministry. Christ often healed in private home settings, whether it was healing Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt 18:14–16) or the paralytic (Mark 2). Many of his most tender moments of ministry were to friends in home settings, whether it was the home of Zaccheus (Luke 19:1–10); that of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Luke 10:38–42); or the wedding in Cana (John 2). Jesus chose to celebrate the first communion service, not in a synagogue or the temple, but in a house (Matt 26:18). He commonly preached to crowds assembled in houses (Mark 2:1). Our Lord’s intimate mentoring ministry with the twelve disciples is our earliest model of focusing on a small group meeting in a home. Garrison rightly observes:

Though Jesus did teach and perform miracles in large settings, he seemed to reserve his most precious teachings for the quiet time with his inner circle. Jesus appears to have no home of his own, but he was comfortable teaching, evangelizing, healing, and discipling in the homes of others wherever he was invited. . . . Jesus brought Christianity into the home.⁴⁷

When Christ sent out his seventy disciples in pairs for a hands-on assignment, he instructed them to find a “man of peace” in each village. They were to identify one with influence in the community who was responsive to their message and build a spiritual base of operations from that home—rather than skip around from house to house (Luke 10:1–11; cf. Matt 10:1–15).⁴⁸

Private residences also had a pivotal role in the life and growth of the early church. The Holy Spirit came upon the initial group of believers on the day of Pentecost as they

⁴³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 857.

⁴⁴ Acts 2:26; 5:42; 12:12; 16:14–15; 20:20, Rom 16:3–5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15–16; Phil 1:2.

⁴⁵ Acts 9:31; Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2 cf. 16:1, 19; 2 Cor 1:1 cf. 8:1; Gal 1:2, 22; Eph 1:1; Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1. Some of these references could arguably refer to a single HC located in that city—such as in Thessalonica, Corinth, or Ephesus. But it seems likely that as the number of disciples multiplied in a city or region, the number of HCs also multiplied. In his epistles, Paul seems to be addressing the church (singular) in Thessalonica, which was actually the corporate body of all believers in the city/area meeting in numerous HCs. The fact that normally each citywide or regional church had elders (plural) also seems to indicate there was at least one elder leading each home church.

⁴⁶ Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 12:28; 15:9; Eph 1:22; 3:10–11; 5:22–32; Heb 12:23.

⁴⁷ Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World*, 213.

⁴⁸ Jesus’ strategy for the 70 and the 12 was the same: don’t waste time moving around to different homes or seeking more comfortable housing; instead establish headquarters in one receptive home in the village and stay there building the ministry and extending the outreach (Luke 10:5–7; cf. Matt 10:11–13). We will elaborate more on this strategy later.

gathered in a home (Acts 1:12, 13; cf. 2:1, 2).⁴⁹ Shortly after Pentecost, the Jerusalem church began meeting daily from house to house, living a common life together which was characterized by eating meals, praying, sharing goods, and holding onto the apostle's teaching (Acts 2:42–46; 5:42; 12:12).⁵⁰ Saul, the persecutor, is said to have gone from house to house, searching for believers (Acts 8:3). It is likely that he was attacking house churches, barging in to arrest believers during their meetings. Peter brought the good news to the Roman officer Cornelius' family and friends who had gathered in his home (Acts 10).⁵¹ The fact that Cornelius and many of his family and friends were immediately baptized upon their conversion (Acts 10:44–48) seems to indicate that a house church was being set up in Caesarea.

Some observers have tried to minimize the import of this pattern of the early church's meeting in homes by stating it was because of first-century persecution and or the extreme poverty of the early Christians. Thus they had no other choice but to meet in homes. But it is doubtful these were the deciding factors.⁵² It is more likely other factors—like their theology of church as family (more on this later) and desire for intimacy and accountability—that caused them to meet in residences. Then too, the reason for meeting in homes may have been more practical – public places were less available.

When Paul, once converted and called, embarked on his missionary travels across the Roman Empire, he seemed to regularly gather new converts into private homes. For example, Lydia's house may have become the gathering place in Philippi for Europe's first church (Acts 16:14–15, 40).⁵³ In Corinth, believers evidently met in the homes of Gaius

⁴⁹ Robert Fitts, a HC advocate, considers it significant that a number of foundational events took place in someone's house. He writes, "The first worship service [the wise men with baby Jesus] happened in a house. The first communion service was in a house. The first healing service was conducted in a house [Peter's]. The first preaching of the gospel to Gentiles came about in the house of Cornelius. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was in a house" (*Church in the House*, 8). HC advocates would like to build their case by seeing a *divinely designed pattern* in all of these instances. More on the danger of this kind of argument later.

⁵⁰ For a good discussion of probable HCs in Jerusalem see Del Birkey, *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1988), 41–42. Interestingly, it was through the prayers of a Jerusalem HC (in Mary's home) that Peter was delivered from prison (see Acts 12:12–13).

⁵¹ The Cornelius episode may be a good example of how to start a HC. Someone who is hungry for God and the things of God calls together his extended family and then calls for the man of God to come and share the word of God! This is a great example of how the gospel best spreads through natural webs of relationships—*oikos* or household evangelism. It also illustrates the "Man of Peace" principle given by Christ himself to his followers (see Matt 10 and Lk 10).

⁵² Zdero, for example, argues that persecution in the first century was sporadic and localized and that early believers actually enjoyed good rapport with their unbelieving neighbors (see Acts 2:46–7; 5:12–6; 9:31). He also contends that there was no pervasive poverty among early believers, as is commonly felt. There were those with high social position and wealth who were converted (the Ethiopian eunuch-treasurer, Cornelius the Roman centurion, Lydia the merchant, Erastus, Philemon the slave holder, etc.) (*The Global House Church Movement*, 23–25). E. A. Judge shows that the early Christian household communities were quite heterogeneous, representing all social classes found in the wider society. They were not just made up of poor people (*The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* [London: Tynedale, 1960]).

⁵³ Acts 16 does not clearly say the first city believers in Philippi met in Lydia's home or that this is how the church grew—only that Paul and his team were invited into her home to "stay" awhile. It is reasonable to assume that as a wealthy business woman she had a large home which could handle a growing group; she was evidently also very hospitable. Acts 16:40 does indicate that upon their release from prison, Paul and Barnabas did seek out Lydia (the term "house of" is not in the Greek text but added by translators) in order to encourage "the brethren" before they departed. This may indicate a church met in her home. Interestingly, the converted jailer at Philippi also brought Paul and Barnabas into *his* house to meet his extended family (*oikos*). Could a home church have also developed there? From the above, it is not

(Rom 16:23), Stephanus (1 Cor 16:5, 15), and Chloe (1 Cor 1:11), but there were probably others as well.⁵⁴ The fact that Paul often ended his letters by greeting those who hosted house gatherings⁵⁵ also supports the thesis that the newly planted assemblies met in homes. Significantly, NT writers make a point to mention the names of those hosting the local churches in their homes:

Host(s)	Locale	
Mary	Jerusalem	(Acts 12:12)
Titus Justus	Corinth	(Acts 18:7)
Aquilla & Priscilla	Ephesus	(1 Cor 16:9) ⁵⁶
Nympha	Colossae	(Col. 4:15)
Philemon	Colossae	(Philemon 2)

Paul’s lengthy farewell greeting in Romans 16:3–16 may well be a listing of various house churches in the great population center called Rome. If so, his letter was probably circulated among them.⁵⁷ (See Appendix E for a detailed chart of all the house churches specifically mentioned—or probable—in the NT.)

Paul clearly tells us that his habit—at least at Ephesus—was to teach “publicly and from *house to house*” (“from household [*oikos*] to household” see Acts 20:20 cf. 20:6–8).⁵⁸ Interestingly, when Paul comes to the end of his missionary career he is found renting a house in Rome (Acts 28:30–31). So not only did he make use of the homes of others for proclaiming the gospel, but Paul also used his own rented house for spreading the Gospel.

Though there is some consensus on the above NT evidence that the early Christians met in houses, the question arises: did first-century believers meet *exclusively* in private homes? This writer believes we cannot know that for certain from the record. The NT indicates the first believers were also found in public places—sometimes in large

unrealistic to see numerous HCs meeting in this city—which continued to divide and multiply. Luke seems to indicate this was the pattern elsewhere (cf. Acts 9:31).

⁵⁴ Other probable HCs in Corinth may have gathered in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (see Acts 18:1–4) and possibly around personalities like Paul, Peter, Apollus, and even Christ (see 1 Cor 1:11–13). See Birkey for a good discussion of these possibilities (*The House Church*, 43–44).

⁵⁵ See Rom 16:3–5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15–16; Philemon; Phil 4:21–22.

⁵⁶ According to Acts 18:18, 19, 24–26, Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus possibly up to a year and a half before leaving them in the city, probably to continue leading the HC and train others. According to Romans 16:3–5, they later moved to Rome and organized a church in their home there as well.

⁵⁷ It seems unlikely there was one centrally located and administered “church” in Rome, based upon the evidence of Paul’s letter and the probability of the situation there. He does not use his usual form of greeting (which would have been, “to the church of God which is in Rome”) but addresses the letter, “to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (1:7). Scholars like William Barclay, have proposed that this letter was circulated in several forms. See William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 9–10; also F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). Bruce suggests that perhaps it was Phoebe that carried the letter from one HC to another (*Ibid.*, 384). For a good discussion of the possible HCs scattered around Rome see Birkey, *The House Church*, 46–50.

⁵⁸ The common Greek term *oikos*, used here, can have the sense of either a dwelling place (a home) or a household (a family). It can be either the place or the people. Context determines which. Both may be intended in some instances, such as here in Acts 20:20.

groups—in the temple courts in Jerusalem and in synagogues.⁵⁹ It seems the early church met in every conceivable location and structure. They utilized whatever was available to them. Believers used rented facilities (Acts 19:9; 28:30–31) and public forums (Acts 16:13), everything from small rooms to spacious, enclosed courtyards.⁶⁰ However, those who are not house church advocates need to be fair with the biblical record and not read back into these “public” texts more than is there. An impartial reading of these accounts seems to indicate these public places were used *primarily for evangelism*. These larger group events held in public were often not believers’ meetings for worship and mutual edification. When they occasionally met in public forums, and even in the open air, it was usually for outreach purposes.⁶¹ In sum, at best we can affirm this: though the early church did not meet *exclusively* in homes, they did meet *primarily* in homes both for believers’ meetings and even for some evangelistic efforts. Thus, it may be accurate to describe them as a house church movement which grew because it remained fluid, mobile, and relationship-oriented.

Theological Evidence: Church as Organic

Another line of scriptural evidence seems to support the house church. From the NT, we gather that the early Jesus movement saw itself *more as an organism than an organization*. They identified themselves more along the line of relationships with each other and Christ, rather than mere membership in an organization. This is seen in the numerous metaphors and word pictures biblical writers employed to describe themselves. Early believers commonly characterized themselves as the family (or household) of God,⁶² the body of Christ,⁶³ a spiritual temple,⁶⁴ the bride of Christ,⁶⁵ and other descriptive terms.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ See Acts 2:1–3:26; 5:12–16; 13:14–16; 14:1–7; 16:13–18; 17:1–5; 18:4, 24–28.

⁶⁰ Recent excavations have revealed that several Roman houses of that period had *atria* typically measuring in excess of 1000 square feet (Earle E. Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 141). For a sketch of a recently discovered Roman home evidently adapted for use as a *domus ecclesiae* and built around A.D. 250 in Dura-Europos, see Birkey, *The House Church*, 55–57.

⁶¹ We know, for example, that Paul commonly evangelized in the public synagogue (Acts 9:20; 13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:1, 2, 17; 18:4, 19, 26; 19:8) because he had an open door. Yet there are exceptions. Acts 19:9 seems to be one example of public gatherings for believers’ edification; Paul “withdrew” from the opposers and “took away the disciples” to the school of Tyrannus where they could be further instructed for two more years.

⁶² The church is commonly described in familial terms—as God’s household, little children, brothers, sisters, children of God, sons of the heavenly father, etc. See John 1:12–13; Eph 2:19; Gal 5:10; 1 Tim 3:4–5, 15; 5:1–2; Heb 2:11; 1 Pet 4:17; 1 John 2:1, 12–14; 3:1; 2 John 1:1.

⁶³ That the church is seen as Christ’s body implies a living, organic, and mutually dependent relationship between the two. See Rom 7:4; 1 Cor 12:10; 16–17; 12:4–30; Eph 4:11.

⁶⁴ 1 Pet 2:5.

⁶⁵ This metaphor reveals the mysterious loving bond between Christ and the church. See Eph 5:22–32; John 3:29; Rev 18:23; 19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17.

⁶⁶ Lesser-employed NT word pictures include vine and branches, teacher and pupil, shepherd and flock, kings and priests, etc. These images speak of identity, relationships, community, and mission.

Out of this family and organic theology, came their church practice.⁶⁷ These key NT ideas influenced how they practically organized themselves and functioned. Their beliefs determined their behavior; their function determined their form. Though the early believers may not necessarily have consciously employed the house church form, it probably was the natural result of their theology of church as family, and their belief in the participatory and interactive nature of household gatherings (cf. 1 Cor 14:26).⁶⁸ House-sized churches enabled them to implement organic principles of church growth and health. Their assemblies could be simple, small, natural, intimate, inexpensive, adaptable, and duplicatable. As an emerging house church movement, they evidently kept organization to a minimum so they could focus on the mandate of making disciples and expanding into frontier regions by planting new house churches.⁶⁹ Thus, the early Christians met in homes, not primarily because of persecution or poverty, but as a result of their underlying beliefs and values. These core convictions—particularly for Jewish-background believers—no doubt reflected a Hebrew model of Christian education where parents were viewed as the primary influencers.⁷⁰

The NT is clear that no physical locale or building structure uniquely attracts the presence of God for the Christian community. There is no biblical or theological reason why a church (people) should need to meet in a building. Christ clearly taught that the quality of one's worship is determined by the attitude of the heart, rather than the location of the body (see his conversation with the Samaritan woman: John 4:20–24). He promised that wherever at least two people gathered in his name, he would reside among them (Matt 18:20). In the OT economy, one could argue that Jehovah God required sacred buildings, sacred rituals, and sacred days. But now, under the new covenant, all the types and shadows are totally fulfilled in Christ. Believers no longer need the tabernacle, nor the vestments, nor the temple, nor the furniture, or such like. "Christ is all in all." We no longer need a "holy place" such as the Jews had. We don't need the shadow when we have the substance—Christ! This is why Stephen (Acts 7:44–51), when falsely charged with blasphemy against the temple, properly rebuked the Jews for venerating a building, while stubbornly resisting the Spirit's work. With a quotation from Isaiah 66:1–2, originally intended to warn the Israelites against overestimating the sig-

⁶⁷ For more on Paul's theology of church as family and how it influenced the early church see Banks and Banks, *The Church Comes Home*, 30–33). Paul no doubt was utilizing the prevailing social structure—the "household" (*oikos* = extended family)—of his day.

⁶⁸ Over 65 years ago, Floyd Filson called attention to the failure of modern scholarship to grapple with this household concept from NT times. In his seminal article, "The Significance of the Early House Churches," he affirmed that the NT church would be better understood if more attention were paid to the actual physical conditions under which the first Christians met and lived. He particularly recommended the house be carefully considered (Floyd V. Filson, "The Significance of the Early House Churches," *JBL* 58 (1939): 105–06.

⁶⁹ Yet it is also true that NT churches had considerable amount of organization: they kept lists of widows, elected deacons, collected funds for the poor, sent letters of commendation, had stated membership rolls, etc.

⁷⁰ Del Birkey, *Family Centered Christian Education*, Learning unit, no. 4 (Oakbrook, IL: Bethany Theological Seminary, 1984). In OT times God's people worshiped together first in their households before they gathered in large festivals or corporately at the temple. See Deut 4:5–14; 8:10–18; cf. Gen 17:10; Exod 12:11.

nificance of the temple,⁷¹ he reminds them that the Creator of the universe cannot be contained or captured by a building made with human hands. Stephen's point: the Jewish leaders were guilty of blasphemy by confining God to an edifice. The previous role of sacred buildings was now at an end. Clearly the early church understood this basic theology.

Twenty-first century Christians give lip service to these two NT truths—that the church is a people, not a building, and that buildings are no longer to be venerated as sacred dwelling places for God⁷²—but they still customarily refer to buildings where they meet as “churches.” This contradiction illustrates the dominant role buildings have played in shaping the practical theology of the contemporary church. One author calls this preoccupation with church buildings an “edifice complex.”⁷³

An Historical Sidebar: the Rise of Church Structures

The first independent church buildings began to appear toward the end of the second century. Often, wealthy Christian homeowners would bequeath their estates to the churches meeting in their homes. The houses were remodeled (often into an architectural style called basilicas) and used exclusively for church meetings.⁷⁴ Edgar Lee Wright suggests the architectural design of basilicas enhanced the distinction between clergy and laity.⁷⁵ This resulted in a less personal and more passive style of worship becoming normative for the laity. With the rise of Constantine, the church entered an era of great favor and power. Under the influence of the state, Christians acquired large houses and land for the construction of permanent church structures. Spectator Christianity became even more entrenched with the erection of massive cathedrals during the Middle Ages. Christendom, rather than grassroots communities of believers on mission for God, arose. Paid clergy now replaced the participation of ordinary believers. Unfortunately the Reformers did little to correct these ecclesiological concerns.⁷⁶ Yet, running parallel with this state-run church, there were numerous renewal and reform movements, often underground and persecuted, usually led by those considered “radicals” in their day. These restorationists kept alive the concept of simple church and called true believers back to the ba-

⁷¹ R. C. H Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concerns, 1934), 288.

⁷² In fact, church history confirms that veneration of a building used for worship ultimately leads to idolatry and places limitations on the nature of God (I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 146).

⁷³ Hadaway, Dubose, and Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, 73. Also, the Roman Catholic concept of mass (Eucharist) as a sacrifice which must be performed on a sacred altar, has no doubt influenced this view of buildings.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 42–44.

⁷⁵ Edgar Lee Wright, *A Critical Examination of the Origin and Development of House Churches and Their Significance for Contemporary Evangelism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1989), 79.

⁷⁶ Martin Luther, for example—in his preface to the German mass and order of service (1526)—recognized the value of meeting in private homes “to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and do other Christian work” <http://www.carolinaclassical.com/articles/luther_german_mass.pdf> (accessed 6 July 2006). But Luther never pursued this idea for fear of being divisive; later Luther went so far as to deride and persecute those who promoted home gatherings (Zdero, *Global House Church Movement*, 64).

sics of church form and function.⁷⁷ It seems the modern house church movement is a continuation of this resurgent wind of the Spirit to return to a more organic, missional model of doing church.

Is This *the* Biblically Prescribed Model?

Some proponents of the home church model take the above biblical evidence and seek to establish an apostolic blueprint for all congregations in future generations. The question naturally arises: did the early church apostles expect all subsequent churches to follow the NT church patterns they had modeled? Representative of many who favor house churches, Zdero boldly argues that the NT apostles established *both church form and function* which are then to be viewed as normative for all churches thereafter.⁷⁸ Zdero bases his case entirely on four statements of Paul:

- "... hold firmly to the *traditions*, just as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor 11:2 [emphasis his]).
- "... stand firm and hold onto the *traditions* which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us" (2 Thess 2:15 NASB [emphasis his]).
- "But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have *no other practice*, nor have the churches of God" (1 Cor 11:16 NASB [emphasis his]).
- "... let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is *the Lord's command*" (1 Cor 14:36–38 NIV [emphasis his]).

He interprets these apostolic "traditions" (*paradosis*) as not just "mere teachings" [= doctrinal truths] but to also include "*patterns and practices* that the apostles, as God's messengers, infused into the lives of the churches they founded. They implemented a blueprint for the way churches were to function *and the form they were to take.*"⁷⁹

I see several problems with this broad interpretation of *paradosis*. First, in the strict sense used in the two passages quoted, *paradosis* is a synonym for God's word, i.e., scriptural revelation given through the apostles to be viewed as authoritative. Second, it ignores the immediate context in both the Corinthian⁸⁰ and Thessalonian epistles; in both

⁷⁷ Numerous men and movements could be cited who sought to restore/return to a NT form of church life. Pre-reformation restorationist movements (A.D. 300–1500): the Donatists, Priscillians, Paulicians, Peter Waldo and the Waldensians, Francis of Assisi, the Little Brothers, John Wyclif and the Lollards, and Peter Chelcicky and the Czech Brethren. Post-reformation movements: Caspar von Schwenckfeld, Juan deValdes, the Anabaptists (Ulrich Zwingli, Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz, and George Blourock), Jean de Labadie, George Fox, Philip Jacob Spener, and John Wesley. (See John Driver, *Radical Faith*, 1999; Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World*, 1998; E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*, 1999; Peter Bunton, *Cell Groups and House Churches: What History Teaches Us*, 2001; C. Arnould Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 1995; and Howard Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal*, 1980.) For an overview of church history from a HC perspective, tracing participatory forms of church life through the centuries, see Banks and Banks, *Church Comes Home*, 49–73.

⁷⁸ Zdero, *Global House Church Movement*, 54–57. Another HC proponent who strongly believes that HCs are the *biblically required* form of church is Eric Holter (Eric Holter, "House Church Ecclesiology," <http://www.dickscoggins.com/other/papers.php?chapter_id=62§ion_id=00> [accessed 20 March 2006]). Holter acknowledges that he holds the same position as Steve Atkerson and Eric Svendsen in their book, *Toward a House Church Theology*, who dispute the common ecclesiological view that biblical patterns observed in Scripture are descriptive rather than prescriptive. To download this later book, see <http://home.wnm.net/%7Ederekg/house_church/main.html> (accessed 1 May 2001).

⁷⁹ Zdero, *Global House Church Movement*, 54–55 (emphasis mine).

⁸⁰ Zdero's use of 1 Cor 11:16 and 1 Cor 14:36–38 as proof texts for maintaining all early church patterns and practices is problematic. In both passages, the immediate context qualifies the force of Zdero's argument. In 1 Corinthians 11

passages Paul seems to be referencing doctrines and instructions he had *personally taught* them as God’s appointed apostle. Yet in none of the sermons of Paul in Acts or in his teaching in the epistles do we ever see direct commands to use the house church as the prescribed form (the house church “pattern” is taken almost entirely from historical *narrative* passages in Acts). Third, the position that *all* “patterns and practices” are mandatory, if taken to its logical conclusion, would require culturally dated practices which few twenty-first century Christians feel bound by today: all women to wear head coverings (and long hair) in church (the immediate context of 1 Corinthians 11), church members to always greet one another with a “holy kiss” (1 Thess 5:16), missionaries to go to synagogues first when entering a new city, casting lots to elect officers (Acts 1:26), washing one another’s feet, and even singing and speaking in Greek!⁸¹ Finally, this interpretation does not seem to allow for contextualization of church forms to better fit each culture which the gospel enters. While most missiologists and students of ecclesiology would agree that church functions (i.e., purposes: worship, evangelism, teaching, etc.) *are* normative, many would question whether every church form described in Acts must be practiced today.

Ultimately, this is a hermeneutical question of authorial intent. Did Luke, the inspired author of Acts (where the house church pattern is found), intend to present one single church form for the church? Or did God intend to present in the historical narratives of Acts *foundational principles* which he expected local bodies of believers to adjust to their cultural context?⁸² There is real danger in searching Acts for strict “New Testament guidelines” for church planting. It would be better to see the NT—and particularly the historical narrative passages—as giving insights and principles, rather than blueprints, methodology, and strategy. Stuart Murray properly cautions:

But to treat the book of Acts simply as a church planting manual fails to recognize the author’s purpose, does not do justice to the breadth of its interests, and may lead to illegitimate conclusions being drawn. ... The fact that some action was taken in the book of Acts, or that some strategy was used, does not require us to assume that this was the *appropriate* action or strategy in that context, or that this is transferable to other contexts. ... Narrative is open to differ-

Paul is saying that in respect to this issue (the “practice”) of head coverings on females, neither he, nor the Lord, nor the churches have any other custom—i.e., female rebellion was not allowed. The 1 Corinthians 14 “command” refers to Paul’s immediate instructions limiting/regulating tongues speakers in corporate worship. Neither passage speaks of “house churching.” In fact *Paul never addresses the merits/benefits of house churches or directly recommends it*—aside from greeting specific individuals in HCs.

⁸¹ Other examples of NT *practices* which one would need to observe if God’s intent is for all believers to follow every recorded behavior and example: going up to the temple to pray at 3:00 p.m. (Acts 3:1); selecting just seven deacons (Acts 6:3); selling lands and property to give to the church leaders (Acts 4:32–35); prayer and fasting with ordination (Acts 13:1–3); “laying on of hands” with each missionary commissioning (Acts 13:1–3); expecting miracles and wonders to accompany preaching (Acts 14:3); practicing circumcision (Acts 15:5); abstaining from eating blood (Acts 15:29); taking a vow to cut off the hair (Acts 18:18); lifting one’s hands when praying (1 Tim 2:8).

⁸² For a well articulated presentation of this author’s position—that principles not prescribed patterns are to be sought in the Book of Acts—see Edward C. Pentecost, *Issues in Missiology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 65–77. For an excellent defense of the need for contextualization in the narrative story of Acts, see Dean Fleming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 23–55. For an older defense of the principles *and* patterns position, see Alexander Rattray Hay, *The New Testament Order for Church and Missionary* (Temperley, Argentina: New Testament Missionary Union, 1947) and Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

ent interpretations. Acts is a significant source of inspiration, encouragement, warning, and reflections, rather than of blueprint and unwarranted conclusions.⁸³

Murray also wisely warns church planting enthusiasts about the danger of seeking to discover and restore the original “New Testament church.” Restorationist movements through the centuries have often made this mistake: “The search for the authentic NT church ... has [often] hindered the development of an ecclesiology that is flexible enough to survive cultural change.”⁸⁴ This seems to be a problem with some of the overly zealous home church advocates, though not all house churches share this dogmatic perspective.

In sum, the NT seems to indicate that first-century believers often gathered together in private homes, yet it does not mandate this form for future generations.

STRENGTHS OF THE HOUSE CHURCH MODEL

There are many benefits found in the house church model which should commend this approach to church planters in our time. A fair appraisal of the house church model uncovers at least *ten strengths* which even the skeptics must acknowledge.

Evangelistically Effective

The most effective method of evangelism is not growing existing churches, but planting new ones. Because house churches are the most easily replicated form of church, they are an obvious choice for church planting. In addition, house churches are often better at encouraging friendship and lifestyle evangelism than conventional churches. Because of their face-to-face approach, they serve as a neighborhood visual aid to the Gospel and an evangelistic front door to the seeker. Cole describes the emerging model of bringing faith to people this way:

The Great Commission says that we are to “go into all the world,” but we’ve turned the whole thing around and made it “come to us and hear our message.” ... Instead of bringing people to church so that we can then bring them to Christ, let’s bring Christ to people where they live. We may find that a new church will grow out of such an enterprise, a church that is more centered in life and the workplace, where the Gospel is supposed to make a difference.⁸⁵

Cole encourages church planters to go where people already are—whether coffee houses, bars, pubs, or other “third places”—so that they can connect with seekers and eventually whet seekers’ appetites for Jesus.

Two other reasons can be cited why house churches are effective evangelistic tools. Del Birkey has pointed out that simple churches strengthen the concept of corporate solidarity in Christian conversion. In the early church, household (*oikos*) conversions were common (Acts 10:1–2; 16:13–15; 31–4; 18:18): “The house church as a structure obvi-

⁸³ Stuart Murray, *Church Planting: Laying Foundation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 76–77 (emphasis his).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸⁵ Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).xxvi.

ously undergirded this socio-cultural phenomenon.”⁸⁶ Orlando Costas reminds us that conversion is not just an individual but a missional commitment, a socio-ecclesial reality. It does not take place in a vacuum, but rather within particular social contexts.⁸⁷ House church planting is a sound mission strategy because it focuses on parents as the influencers of households, thus strengthening a basic biblical unit of society. A major component of Paul’s overall mission strategy was this mini-strategy of reaching whole households.⁸⁸

A final reason house churches are effective is outreach: they embody the biblical concept of Christian hospitality. Abraham J. Malherbe points out that hospitality was regarded as a virtue since classical times by pagans as well as Jews. He believes the theological and practical implications of hospitality as practiced by the early church are largely unrecognized in our day. NT house churches grew because they gave hospitality a high priority and sought to excel in this virtue.⁸⁹ They thus became exceedingly attractive to outsiders.⁹⁰

Culturally Relevant

House churches naturally become a part of the local community and easily tap into relational connections, thereby more readily taking on an indigenous flavor. The house church model seems to be almost universally acceptable. Among most of the world’s peoples the home-based church would be culturally-fitting.⁹¹ In the context of the ancient world, small group gatherings were a generally accepted phenomenon. Robert Banks points out that the Pauline ideal of church (*ekklesia*) encompassed all three human quests then current in first-century small group movements. The church as a family *household* fulfilled the longing for personal identity and intimacy. The church as a voluntary small-group *association* fulfilled the first-century aspiration for a kind of universal fraternity. And the church as a spiritual *community* was invested with a supra-national and supra-temporal significance that instilled supernatural certainty.⁹² Thus home church gather-

⁸⁶ Del Birkey, “The House Church: A Missiological Model” in *Missiology: An International Review* 19:1 (January 1991): 73.

⁸⁷ Orlando E. Costas, “Conversion as a Complex Experience—A Personal Case Study” in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, John R. W. Stott and Robert Coote, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 183–87.

⁸⁸ Paul’s missionary strategy worked like this: as he traveled into a new locale, he needed a meeting place for a center of operations. Likewise as new believers began to multiply, a place was needed for the gathered church. The two needs were met in one place. As Paul began his work in a city, his primary objective was to first win a household. The *oikos* [household] not only provided a solid group of converts, but was well-suited to serve as a center for evangelism to other households and the surrounding neighborhood.

⁸⁹ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State U, 1977), 67.

⁹⁰ Another aspect of NT hospitality and a related factor in the transmission of the Gospel was the common acceptance of the traveling preachers by entire households. This social phenomenon sped the expansion of the Christian faith (Donald Wayne Riddle, “Early Christian Hospitality: A Factor in the Gospel Transmission,” *JBL* 57 (1938): 152–54.

⁹¹ A few cultures do exist where it is very unusual to welcome strangers into one’s home. Even in our North American culture some people view a house church (HC) as a sect.

⁹² Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community* (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1994), 43–44.

ings were not at odds with contemporary appreciations in Paul's day. Nor should they be in our day. Birkey elaborates on the universality of this missiological model:

House churches provide a decentralized missional freedom for creative expression within cultural diversity. Since the church is the proper sociological package in which the content of the gospel is wrapped for communication cross-culturally (Filbeck 1985, 168), it should be a kind of "dynamic equivalence" church which looks "in its culture as a good Bible translation looks in its language" (Willowbank Report 1980, 330).⁹³

House churches seem appropriate not only for all cultures but for various generations. We have already elaborated on their appeal to contemporary post-moderns and Gen-Xers in North America. Research shows home churches may also be attractive to the working classes and urban poor, who often view traditional churches as stuffy, unfriendly, and uncomfortable. Howard Snyder comments,

A small group of eight to twelve people meeting together informally in homes is the most effective structure for the communication of the gospel in modern secular-urban society. Such groups are better suited to the mission of the church in today's urban world than traditional church services, institutional church programs, or mass communication media.⁹⁴

Economically Feasible

Some estimate that buildings and staff consume seventy-five percent of a standard church budget with little left over for good works.⁹⁵ House churches can often dedicate up to ninety percent of their offerings to outside causes. One reason for the growing popularity of the home church is that many feel their resources are going into something more meaningful. House churches are far less expensive to start and maintain than traditional churches because they have no buildings, programs, or professional clergy, no big events or big budgets. Thus, they are able to free up funds for community outreach, local benevolence, and international missions. There may be some minor expenses—for food and hospitality, for children's curriculum and supplies, etc.—but these will be minimal. Because simple churches are often led by volunteer lay elders or by part-time bivocational pastors, there are normally no large salaries to pay. It is also possible that ten tithing families could support a full-time pastor if desirable. But since one pastor could possibly oversee more than one house church, he would not have to receive all of his support from one house church.

⁹³ Del Birkey, *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), 72 (citations his).

⁹⁴ Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem of Wine Skins* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975), 139.

⁹⁵ According to a 1989 survey of U.S. Protestant congregations, 82% of church revenues go to buildings, staff, and internal programs, leaving only 18 percent for outreach (cited by Bill Grimes, "The Church that Meets in Your Home" in *Toward A House Church Theology*, ed. Steve Atkerson (Atlanta, GA: New Testament Restoration Foundation, 1996). With HCs the percentages could be reversed!

No Building Limitation

House churches are not bound by church buildings. Whatever use church facilities may or may not have, history demonstrates that they are not essential for rapid church planting movements to start. Donald McGavran notes that the first common obstacle to multiplying churches never appeared in the early church, i.e., the cost of church buildings. He asserts that “the physical fact of the house church should be taken into consideration in any assessment of the causes of the growth of the early church.”⁹⁶ In fact, buildings often seem to be a hindrance. The importance of special buildings was over-emphasized from the third century onward, and its legacy has become “a gross liability to subsequent generations and a millstone which has hampered effective mission since.”⁹⁷ Howard Snyder writes that church buildings attest to five facts about the Western church: its immobility, inflexibility, lack of fellowship, pride, and classic divisions: “The gospel says ‘Go,’ but our buildings say, ‘Stay.’ The gospel says, ‘Seek the lost,’ but our churches say, ‘Let the lost seek the church.’”⁹⁸ The danger: the medium becomes the message.⁹⁹

Church buildings should not be viewed as evil by any means; nor are homes to be seen in any way as a magical panacea. But the practical release of time, energy, and money away from building construction and maintenance and into evangelism and discipleship should cause us to rethink current practices. Without a doubt, many North American congregations spend far too much money on their buildings. Witness the cathedral-type edifices in almost every large city. Our buildings often become monuments to our middle-class lifestyles. We build them not because they are a ministry necessity, but because they make our congregations more attractive to the affluent and middle classes we hope to draw. They too often become status symbols and, at times, idolatrous substitutes for the genuine worship of Christ.

Buildings are neither a ministry necessity nor essential for attracting the unchurched. Rick Warren’s Saddleback Community Church’s growth during its first fifteen years—meeting in numerous leased schools—demonstrates that congregations can grow without a building of their own. It is also a design axiom that form follows function. That God’s design for church calls for accountability, intimacy, community, fellowship and active member participation suggests that the form of the church should be smaller. Buildings can, in fact, be harmful to church life if they permit the congregation to grow so large that it is impossible to have intimate fellowship anymore.

⁹⁶ Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 192–93.

⁹⁷ Derek Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 82.

⁹⁸ Snyder, *The Problem of Wine Skins*, 69–73.

⁹⁹ Another problem: once a building is erected, the church program and budget are largely determined by it.

Very Adaptable

In North America, the flexibility of simple churches is a big advantage. They can accommodate the demands of the multi-job worker, convene around the bedside of an ailing member, or undertake big projects with dispatch. Their adaptability is seen in their ability to attract those desirous of a more relaxed, informal environment. Some of our emerging generations, with strong interest in authentic relationships, will be attracted to simpler churches built on relationships and not highly organized systems and structures. Relational churches offer less formality and tradition while often providing more freedom to be innovative and creative. Furthermore, simple churches can be started almost anywhere anytime. They do not depend upon the latest economic or political forecast. They can start up in one location and if the host needs a rest or the group needs security, can move to another site very easily.

As noted, home churches are structurally more mobile and flexible in areas characterized by persecution and poverty. With a low profile and visibility, they are very resilient, making them almost persecution-proof. House churches easily blend into the community, rendering them less visible to the authorities. As Simson notes, “Since house churches can fit invisibly into the existing architecture of a nation, they are able to respond flexibly to any pressure or new situation.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, this has been a great model for Muslim lands and for China. Birkey, after noting the growth and resilience of home churches in China, Nepal, Burma, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka—where there is much opposition to the Christian faith—concludes that “the church in difficult places of our world is a lesson to the affluent church in the easy places. It shows that the easily corrupted ‘Great Congregation’ of Western progress is not necessarily everywhere desired, nor even possible. The simple but dynamic small-group ‘missionary model’ remains the basic working prototype for outreach and sustaining power....”¹⁰¹

Discipleship and Growth Orientation

House churches normally focus on relationships and the development of people spiritually, not upon executing programs or projects. This people-focus makes them excellent places where new believers can be nurtured in their faith and older Christians can be challenged to “get off their duff” and begin growing. Because it is much more difficult to hide in a small group, accountability is amplified; in traditional churches it is much easier to get lost in the crowd. Member care and shepherding is easier in smaller bodies because everyone knows everyone. House growth structure aids not only in mutual encouragement but in the continuing assimilation of new believers into the life of the body.

¹⁰⁰ Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World: The Return of the House Churches* (Waynesboro, CA: OM Publishing [Paternoster Publishing], 1998), 167.

¹⁰¹ Birkey, *The House Church*, 78. Birkey cites another vital lesson HC participants in hostile lands often learn. Using Chinese believers as examples, he says persecuted Christians have had to “distinguish between essentials and nonessentials, being forced to the essential nature of the church by having all unnecessary, external nonessentials taken away. They have perhaps learned better than any other contemporaries what it means to be the household of faith. The home fellowships are a needed reminder that the church is essentially spiritual in its nature, and that although organizational structure and buildings may facilitate growth, they can also become hindrances” (ibid., 75).

It is far less likely converts will fall through the cracks, falling away from the Lord and the church.

Life transformation occurs best in an atmosphere of familial love, forgiveness, responsibility, modeling, mentoring, and firm discipline. This balance of qualities is normally exhibited in simpler churches. Schwarz's international research indicates that not only do smaller churches have more numerical growth potential, but they also are usually *better* churches as far as the spiritual *quality* of their member's lives.¹⁰² The smaller ratio of leader to members makes true shepherding possible. The house church elder/pastor with few in his flock can easily know, love, counsel, and guide each member. This is not always possible in a large conventional church.

House church observers have sometimes overlooked another key component in the process of cultivation of individual relationships and spiritual growth—the fellowship of shared meals. One thing common to most home church meetings through the centuries—they meet to eat! Often these family-style meals (which could today include anything from light refreshments to a full barbecue dinner) are held in conjunction with the Lord's Supper observance.¹⁰³ Simson points out that the NT indicates four elements standing out in early church life: “*meating*,” *teaching* each other to obey, *sharing* material and spiritual blessings, and *praying*.¹⁰⁴ Collectively, these four growth-inducing elements can be viewed under the banner of biblical “fellowship” (or *koinonia*). The NT term was frequently employed by the early Christians to describe their shared life which they experienced together in the formation of a new community.¹⁰⁵ Stanley J. Grenz proposes that the believers' identity as “co-participants” in the communion of the Trinity (between the Father and the Son mediated by the Spirit) provides the essential foundation for ecclesiology. He further posits that God's overriding agenda for the church is the establishment of this new community¹⁰⁶ House churches, which even today commonly practice two feasts—the Lord's Supper with a communal meal preceding it (as in 1 Cor 11:21)—provide believers with abundant opportunity to express, experience, and enhance their *koinonia* in Christ. This becomes a vital part of the ongoing discipleship and growth process.

¹⁰² Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 46–48. Also see Simson, *Houses that Change the World*, 249–50.

¹⁰³ Robert Banks, in his two volumes on the early church, *Going to Church in the First Century* and *Paul's Idea of Community*, helped to relocate the early church back in the home and around the table, recovering the central place of the love feast. He contends the shared table is a powerful symbol of intimacy, generosity, and acceptance. Thus it is a proper place not only for ongoing discipleship but for initial evangelism.

¹⁰⁴ Simson, *Houses that Change the World*, 81–89.

¹⁰⁵ Paul uses the related adjectival noun *koinonos* three times in the sense of partnering together in a joint activity (1 Cor 10:18ff; 2 Cor 1:7; 8:23; Phlm 17) and the verb *koinoneo* five times with the meaning of either “having to share” in some activity (Rom 15:27; Phil 4:15; Eph 5:11) or of “making a contribution” in a financial or other way (Rom. 12:13; Gal. 6:6). *Koinonia* itself occurs some thirteen times but, as with these related terms, the sense is of participation in some common object or activity, e.g. participation in the Spirit, in someone's faith, in Christ and his sufferings, in the work of the gospel, in a financial contribution (Phil 2:1; 2 Cor 13:13; Phlm 6; Phil 3:10; 1 Cor 1:9; Phil 1:5; Gal 2:9; Rom 15:26).

¹⁰⁶ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman, 1994), 630–31. This major theological motif of *koinonia*, of God's constant desire to establish a new community, also provides a promising connection for secular individuals who have suffered “multiple alienation” and long for true community (George G. Hunter III, *How to Reach Secular People* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992], 49–50).

Highly Participatory

A house-type congregation provides an equal opportunity for all its members to participate at all levels of corporate activity—whether in prayer, worship, Scripture reading, exhortation, or ministry—both within and outside the body. Because of their intimate and interactive nature, all believers, not just professional clergy or key leaders, have the opportunity to exercise their spiritual gifts during church meetings. Many conventional churches have a high number of “spectator” attendees who merely come for the platform entertainment. House churches are laity-centered rather than clergy-centered. They highly value living out the truth of the priesthood of all believers. Because they more readily mobilize the spiritual gifts of their members, home churches create shared ministry and enable a large proportion of their people to be involved in the life of the church.

Development of Leaders

Another advantage of the house church is its efficient use and development of leaders. House churches tend to make it a priority to develop new leaders from among the membership so that new groups can be hived off. The goal is to have an intern leader always in training to one day lead in the spin-off of a daughter group. In addition, lay persons—both men and women—are used very effectively to help lead the house church. The overdependence on paid, ordained clergy is not likely to be found here. It has long been understood by educators that the best method of training is still the apprentice method. This was Jesus’ method. His disciples learned by watching, listening, and doing while they lived their lives with the master teacher himself. House churches enable one to train pastors and church workers while under the supervision of an experienced elder or leader. They grow as the church grows under their leadership. Thus house churches are more likely to impart rather than inherit leadership. This is expressed in a well-known axiom in house church planting movements: “The resources are always in the harvest.”¹⁰⁷

In NT times the host of a house church provided natural leadership (cf. 1 Cor 16:15–16). Floyd Filson notes that Gentile church hosts were often “God-fearers,” suggesting that they were persons of sufficient education and practical administrative ability.¹⁰⁸ It is also noteworthy that in the early church women often played a major role in the founding of house churches and were apparently given some leadership functions as well (Acts 16:14–15, 40; Rom 16:1–2, 3–4; 1 Cor 1:11, 16–19; Col 4:15; 2 John). Home church advocate Birkey contends that “the church everywhere will come to its leadership potential only when ‘the other one-half of the church’ is granted equal freedom for its leadership gifts in all areas of church and mission.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIG Take Resources, 2004), 186. Garrison believes that this axiom is a constant reminder to look for local leaders to get the job done. And it provides “an important corrective for foreign missionaries whose strategies call for heavy reliance upon foreign teammates” (ibid.).

¹⁰⁸ Floyd V. Filson, “The Significance of the Early House Churches,” *JBL* 58 (1939): 112.

¹⁰⁹ Birkey, *The House Church*, 73. Cf. R. Pierce Beaver, *American Protestant Women in World Mission: A History of the First Feminist Movement in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

Inclusive Communities

For the most part, house churches tend to be very inclusive by nature. From their extensive research, Hadaway, Dubose, and Wright point out that house churches seem to be very willing to “accept ‘misfits’ or persons with minor emotional problems. Rather than being homogenous fellowships of young urban couples, house churches are often (but not always) heterogeneous mixtures. Anyone who will attend, follow the rules, and participate is generally accepted and loved.”¹¹⁰ This was true as well of the apostolic church. As a movement of house churches, it brought people together from various socio-economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds—much to the amazement of a watching world. The early house churches were evidently a healthy cross-section of society, reflecting a broad social mixture from wealthy land/home-owner to common slave. E. A. Judge and others have shown that the assumption that early Christians came predominately from the disinherited lower classes cannot be defended.¹¹¹ Racial diversity, social oneness, and sexual equality are vividly portrayed in the decentralized house churches of Rome (cf. Romans 16). Not only was heterogeneity inherent in the early church’s gospel proclamation, but it became a practical reality among the Jewish-Gentile converts in the first house churches. Based on this early history and on current research, we can conclude that home churches have great potential today to nurture a healthy social integration in both society and within the Body of Christ. They provide a fertile seedbed for working toward the eradication of racial and class distinctions in every generation.

Rapid Multiplication

Because house church structure is simple, it is easier to reproduce. Furthermore, in a house church movement, the impetus for planting new churches comes *from within each group*, not a centralized office. The house church movement understands that it is always best to let *churches* multiply churches. To reach a growing world population, believers need to multiply, not just add new churches. Current house church movements globally are outstripping more traditional church planting and church growth efforts.¹¹² House churches seem to have great potential for *exponential* growth. With little structure, small monetary investment, and size limitations, it is natural and relatively simple for house church groups to divide and redivide when they grow too large. This is not seen as a sinful split but as planned parenthood. This is how the gospel spread like wildfire throughout the Roman Empire, transforming cities and nations. Home advocates will say if we want multiplication, the choice is obvious.¹¹³ Thus, house churching seems to be better suited for intentional and quick reproduction than any other church form or planting model.

¹¹⁰ C. Kirk Hadaway, Francis M. Dubose, and Stuart A. Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 241.

¹¹¹ E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale, 1960).

¹¹² Cf. Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World*.

¹¹³ Simson humorously illustrates the reproductive potential and differences between the traditional congregation and HC by comparing them to the fertility of elephants and rabbits! See his *Houses that Change the World*, 106

Is a house church movement—a rapid multiplication of house churches—possible in North America? There does seem to be some indication that several movements have recently begun. Cole describes the spectacular growth of the Awakening Chapels network of organic churches:

In our first year, we began ten new churches. In our second year, Church Multiplication Associates (CMA) started 18 churches. The next year, we added 52 new starts. The momentum was beyond our expectations. In 2002, we averaged two churches a week being started and had 106 starts. The following year, we saw around 200 starts in a single year. We estimate that close to 400 churches were started in 2004, but counting the churches has become a daunting task. At the time of this writing, there have been close to 800 churches started in thirty-two states and twenty-three nations around the world, in only six years.¹¹⁴

Cole states the secret of their emerging movement is “the churches we were starting were small (averaging sixteen people) and simple”—so simple, ordinary people are able to do the work. CMA’s goal: “We want to lower the bar of how church is done and raise the bar of what it means to be a disciple.”¹¹⁵

To summarize: House churches have the advantage of being (1) evangelistically effective, (2) culturally relevant, (3) economically feasible, (4) without building limitations, (5) very adaptable to many settings, (6) discipleship oriented, (7) highly participatory, (8) leadership developing, (9) very inclusive, and (10) rapidly multiplying.

WEAKNESSES WITH THE HOUSE CHURCH MODEL

Along with all of its advantages, the house church movement and model also has a few problems. These inherent weaknesses can be lumped together under six headings.

A Minimalized NT Ecclesiology

Quite a few within house church circles today seem to be watering down or *neglecting essential ecclesiology* described in Scripture. Though enthusiastic about “simple” church, many proponents lack a solid biblical understanding of what “church” is. This is seen first in a common failure to practice biblically prescribed ordinances. With others, as we shall see, there is a de-emphasizing of NT patterns of church leadership. There are other indications that house churches often have a weak ecclesiology. A perusal of their literature finds that attempts to define “church” are often weak. Australians Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, after observing the house church movement for years, caution:

It’s tempting, in our efforts to strip back the church from the empire created by Christendom, to overdo it and end up with the belief that any old bunch of believers sitting together in the same room is a church. But six of us sitting around the same table ... were not a church. We had

¹¹⁴ Cole, *Organic Church*, 26. What is not clear in whether all these new churches multiplied from one source or from another church. My hunch is that outside workers or groups joined the growing CMA movement!

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

made no mutual commitments, shared no long-term calling, were completely unaccountable to one another, and our purpose for gathering was mainly social.”¹¹⁶

A few examples will demonstrate that this warning is needed. Frequently heard among those seeking minimal church is a misuse of Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:20.¹¹⁷ Typical of many others, Robert Fitts writes, “When two or three true, born-again believers come together in His name, Jesus is in the midst. Jesus in the midst is church! ... But is it a church in the fullest sense of the word? Yes ... it is the basic church ... it does not become more church because there are more than two or three. It only becomes a bigger church.”¹¹⁸ This bare-bones definition and other proposals much like it¹¹⁹ seem to ignore other essential qualities which need to be present for a gathering to be a biblical church.

House church advocates often object to historic understandings of the local church. Cole feels that many of the traditional definitions of the local church¹²⁰ are inadequate because they leave out the most important ingredient—the presence of Jesus!¹²¹ He proposes a broader definition of church: “the presence of Jesus among His people called out as a spiritual family to pursue His mission on this planet.”¹²² This author prefers Cole’s understanding over others above because it incorporates at least three essentials: Christ, calling and commissioning. But, is this understanding yet sufficient? Other evangelicals might add another essential: covenant. This is why Stetzer likes the older definition put forth in the SBC Baptist Faith and Message—because it describes baptized believers as

¹¹⁶ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 76.

¹¹⁷ In context, Jesus’ words “Where two or three are gathered in my Name there I am in their midst” are given in conjunction with local church discipline. Christ promises to be present in the midst of an even smaller flock gathered in his name for the purpose of disciplining an unrepentant brother. This verse is not intended to teach us what a true church is—though it does help Christians see that church discipline is *one* mark of a true church.

¹¹⁸ Robert Fitts, *The Church in the House: A Return to Simplicity*, <http://www.robertfitts.com/HTML_books/The%20Church%20in%20the%20House.htm> (accessed 20 March 2006), 13.

¹¹⁹ Other examples of simplistic definitions or understandings of “church” found within the HC movement: “People moving together under the lordship of Christ” (John Dawson, *Taking Our Cities for God* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2001); “Where there are Christians, there is a church” (Montgomery, *DAWN 2000*, 79). Felicity Dale seems to also accept this Matt 18:20 understanding as “the simplest definition of church” (Felicity Dale, compiler, “Getting Started: A Practical Guide to House Church Planting” in *House2House Ministries*, 2002, 26, <www.house2house.com> (accessed 17 March 2006).

¹²⁰ For example, a traditional definition used by Southern Baptists: “A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth” (“The Baptist Faith and Message,” [sbcb.net](http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp), <<http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>> [accessed 19 June 2006]). Most traditional definitions of “church” will include at least five characteristics: (1) a group of believers gathering together regularly; (2) they consider themselves a church; (3) they have qualified elders (and deacons?) present; (4) they regularly practice the ordinances of baptism and communion (as well as church discipline?); and (5) an agreed-on set of doctrinal beliefs.

¹²¹ Cole laments, “Jesus is missing! ... [He] is assumed in the definition because it is *believers* who are gathered. ... Why would you assume Jesus’ presence but make sure a qualified elder is present? This assumption betrays a serious problem in our churches, a serious one. The church is often more about what we bring to the table than what God does. ... If Jesus is missing in our understanding of church, He will likely be missing in our expression of church as well.” (Cole, *Organic Church*, 50, 53).

¹²² *Ibid.*, 53

“associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.”¹²³ Among many home church people, there seems to be a lack of understanding of the role of covenant in the biblical church.

To get around the struggle with accurately defining simple church, a number of house church proponents are now proposing a list of key elements of church life as being “the lowest common denominator” for any assembly to be called “church.” Several examples will show that this is a step in the right direction. Jim Waters, a Southern Baptist House church trainer, proposes four essential elements:

1. God’s Word is proclaimed for edification and evangelism.
2. People worship God together (singing, reading, praying, taking communion).
3. Shared-life fellowship exists within a community (where discipleship occurs).
4. Stewardship is practiced (some form of giving, sharing, and spending money).¹²⁴

Dale proposes nine core values (or DNA) on which a simple or house church must be built.¹²⁵ Neil Cole’s Awakening Chapel movement is built upon three vital “DNA” molecules, which they feel are absolutely necessary for a house church to be biblical and to eventually multiply: **D**ivine truth, **N**urturing relationships, and **A**postolic mission.¹²⁶

What then is a genuine NT Church? This writer is convinced that a biblical assembly exists “when its people function as a church and see themselves as a church.”¹²⁷ A house church of twelve people is a genuine church if it is committed to carrying out biblical purposes and perceives of itself as a church. This means that *all* the characteristics of a NT church need to be present in a simple house church for it to be a biblical body:

Biblical leadership: it should move towards having pastor/elders and deacons.¹²⁸

Biblical ordinances: it should regularly practice believers’ baptism and the Lord’s Supper.¹²⁹

¹²³ Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches* (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), 179 (emphasis mine). Stetzer clearly states, “Biblical churches covenant with one another” (ibid., 177). Garrison, another Southern Baptist, agrees (2004, 259).

¹²⁴ Jim Walters, “Planning, Financing, and Planting a House Church,” 1998, 4. A personal paper obtained from its author 1 May 2006.

¹²⁵ Dale’s DNA (core values) for a genuine church: Christ is the head of the church; the priesthood of all believers; servant leadership; built on relationships; simply reproducible; commitment to aggressive evangelism and growth; a commitment to the body of Christ; non-religious Christianity (Dale, *Getting Started*, 30–61)

¹²⁶ Ibid., 115–21.

¹²⁷ Stetzer (2006), 180.

¹²⁸ I agree with Ed Stetzer: “The Bible spends too much time describing leaders . . . not to have them as a normal part of the life of a NT church. Paul spends too much time appointing such leaders to consider them unnecessary. A church can still exist where there are no delegated leaders [see Titus 1:5], but NT churches work toward the normal offices” prescribed in the NT. “They do not necessarily need to be paid, titled, schooled, but the Bible records their appointment and functions, and we will be remiss to ignore that delegated leaders are part of NT churches” (2006, 158).

¹²⁹ Both the NT and church history show the early church placed great importance on participation in the ordinances of baptism and The Lord’s Supper. Significantly, the NT gives instructions about *when* and *how* to partake of these memorial celebrations (see 1 Corinthians 11). Stetzer (158) reminds us, “These are not quaint relics of a foregone era; they are commanded celebrations . . . given by Christ to remind us of his death and resurrection.”

Covenant community: its people should be in a committed relationship with Christ and with one another (implying growth toward godliness, accountability, and biblical discipline).¹³⁰

Biblical purposes: it should seek to carry out evangelism, worship, discipleship, service, fellowship.

Biblical preaching: the Word is shared in some form for believers' edification.¹³¹

Regular meetings: members meet together regularly, not just gather occasionally.¹³²

Submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ: under his headship and living for his ultimate glory. Stripping back all the non-essentials, this understanding gives us the biblical "essence" of the church.

Once we have defined the minimal "essential" ingredients according to the Word of God for a local expression of the universal church, we are then free to plant many new kinds of churches—including house churches—that might take on many different faces of form and function. Stetzer explains, "Clearly ecclesiology is not a blank slate to draw out of the cultural situation. The Bible tells us that certain things need to exist for a biblical church to exist. Certainly, *how* we do some of those things is determined by context, but *that* we do them is determined by the Scriptures."¹³³ For any movement of churches to see the blessing of God it must be committed to a full ecclesiology, one compatible with the totality of NT teaching and practice. Frost and Hirsch suggest that a truly missional, incarnational, and contextualized church has an equal commitment (via covenant) to *communion* (Christ), *community* (fellow believers), and *commission* (the world).¹³⁴ I believe this is a helpful paradigm to keep us from watering down "church."

Instability and Insecurity

A second weakness with the house church model is their typically *unstable nature*. Many modern house churches seem to have a fairly short shelf-life; they disintegrate over a brief time span. Viola, notes that the typical house church has an average life span of six months to four years! He has seen a few rare bodies survive beyond ten years. Why do many not endure? He claims some house churches dissolve over an irreconcilable

¹³⁰ For a church to be a church, it has to *consider* itself to be a church body and have *expectations* for the church participants—wherever it meets. This would include the understanding that *some people are part of the body and some are not*. And this committed community of believers should be holding one another accountable for growth and godliness. This will mean that sometimes people are "removed" from the body because of unrepentant, open sin inconsistent with their covenanted commitment to one another (Matt 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5:9 ff.).

¹³¹ Preaching, or some form of proclamation of the word of God, does not seem to be optional in a NT assembly (see 2 Tim 3:1–4; Gal 6:6). It is not to be thrown out as irrelevant to today's world. The *form* (whether speaking loudly from behind a sanctuary pulpit or sharing in a conversational tone in a HC living room) is not biblically prescribed, but the *function* of preaching is. See Stetzer (2006), 158-9.

¹³² Biblical churches *do* meet—the early church did so at least weekly (on the Lord's Day?) and very possibly daily at least in small groups. NT bodies are not just informal gatherings on the Internet or an occasional casual coming together at a coffeehouse. Though a church could meet in a coffee shop—or anywhere for that matter—the point is it should aim to gather regularly to carry out biblical functions. Christians can meet at other times and places, but they may not always be meeting as a church body.

¹³³ Seltzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 159 (emphasis his).

¹³⁴ Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*, 76–80.

split or unresolved crisis (often a power struggle or bickering over a theological hobby horse); other fold due to an authoritarian leader.¹³⁵ Another reason some home churches eventually fold: they suffer from *koinonitis*, where fellowship and community become the main thing and the only thing. They lose any concern for evangelism and outreach and so become very inward-focused and eventually die.¹³⁶

In North America, the pull toward becoming a more traditional church with property and a building is quite strong. As a house group grows and space becomes a problem, it is often tempted to solve its challenges by buying property. Hadaway, DuBose, and Wright have documented this common problem within the early house church movement. Many will eventually “seek stability through greater structure. Over time, new or innovative groups have a natural tendency towards institutionalization: they seek stability through structure and cultural conformity.”¹³⁷ Accommodating to middle class culture, they soon become no different from what they sought to replace.

Uncertainty over Biblical Leadership

A third weakness within many house churches is a *de-emphasizing of NT patterns of leadership*. This is seen in three ways within house church circles. First, the legitimate *pastoral role* is often minimized. House church advocates often state or imply that pastors are either unnecessary or at least optional. Some of this seems to be a reaction to what many see as the problem of professional clergy and domineering preachers. Others, objecting to the concept of salaried or full-time pastors, promote lay elders who are bivocational and can support themselves.¹³⁸ Still others seem to object to the concept of ordaining of elders and so minimize the value of formal theological training. Rather than recognizing the benefit of one local pastor or a group of qualified elders serving a house church, many contemporary house church leaders/writers seem to elevate the role of mobile leaders, a cadre of itinerant men (and women!) who serve a number of area house churches.¹³⁹

This brings us to a second misunderstanding. Prominent in the writing of many North American house church enthusiasts today is a *glorification of “the five-fold ministry.”* Taking Ephesians 4:11–14 as their (proof) text, many are calling for a restoration in these “last days” of all the “ascension gifts” or “apostolic” gifts—authentic apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers (some see four, combining the last two). The ministry role of these five gifted leaders typically comes packaged in a pentecostal/charismatic

¹³⁵ Frank Viola, *So You Want to Start a House Church* (Gainesville, FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 2003), 17.

¹³⁶ Dennis McCallum, one of the lead elders in the Xenos Fellowship Church in Columbus, Ohio, describes eleven reasons why home churches fail, based upon their extensive experience: (1) Not based on NT theory/ theology; (2) wrong criteria for selection of leaders; (3) insufficient authority given to leaders; (4) unhealthy inward focus; (5) no church discipline within the group; (6) only one type of group—no diversity; (7) inadequate equipping of would-be leaders; (8) no multiplication goals; (9) small groups seen as peripheral rather than central to the life of the [sponsor] church; (10) HCs viewed as a threat by the pastor of the central church; and (11) HCs introduced in a programmatic way, not a natural [organic] way. See his helpful article at <<http://xenos.org/classes/papers/10.htm>>.

¹³⁷ Hadaway, Dubose, and Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, 218, 222.

¹³⁸ Rad Zdero, *The Global House Church Movement* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2004), 42–43.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 44–48.

theology. That is, apostles are given authority over local churches and their lay elders; prophets are expected to speak forth fresh revelation from God;¹⁴⁰ evangelists to perform signs and wonders, etc. These apostles¹⁴¹ and prophets typically engender fan-club followings and are often treated like celebrities. Viola has found that their emphasis is frequently on the spectacular and what God is “going to do” in the *future*—rather than on the unsearchable riches that are in Christ *now* and how God’s people can appropriate them *today*!¹⁴² Normally all five of these gifts are seen as operative in itinerant-type ministries; preferably they are to travel around and serve numerous house churches, rather than settle down to serve (and be accountable to!) one house church. Inherent in this mobile leadership model is the assumption that a resident pastor (shepherd) or local elder team cannot by themselves “equip the saints” for ministry. It takes the complementary gifts of the other four to move a house church toward Christlikeness and fruitfulness.¹⁴³ Space does not allow me to deal further with my objections to this five-fold leadership structure.¹⁴⁴

A final evidence of the current confusion over biblical leadership found in house churches, is seen in the frequent *abuse of spiritual authority*. Hadaway, Dubose, and Wright point out that this problem has two dimensions, both of which may cause some to fear joining house church ministries. The first is the tendency of untrained or wrongly chosen leaders to become “little Caesars”: “Without the constraint of a congregational polity structure, an immature house church leader can become quite autocratic.” The second aspect of this authority problem is seen in the shepherding concept. Back in the 1970s and 80s these researchers identified in many house churches an unbiblical shepherding paradigm which overemphasized lay “submission” and led to a “master-servant” relationship rather than the biblical concept of servant-leadership.¹⁴⁵ They warn, “It is not just the extent of control itself which may eventuate into an unintended legalism but the nature of the control which may produce undue spiritual and psychological dependency, especially if it is perceived to be biblical.”¹⁴⁶ Ironically, house church advo-

¹⁴⁰ For example, Issue 9 of the “House2House” magazine focused on the theme: “What is the Holy Spirit Saying to His People?” It contained several lengthy recently received “prophecies” given to the modern church.

¹⁴¹ My understanding of modern-day “apostles”: Though the apostolic *office* has ceased, the NT seems to teach that there were others beyond the Twelve (the “Apostles”) who were “apostles” (= small a) who carried on the continuing ministry of itinerant church planting. Examples: Apollus (1 Cor 4:6–9), Andronicus (Rom 16:7), Barnabas (Acts 14:3–4, 14; 1 Cor 9:5–6), Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25), James the Lord’s brother (1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19), Junias (Rom 16:7), Paul (Gal 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col 1:1, et al.), Silas (1 Thess 1:1; 2:6), Timothy (1 Thess 1:1; 2:6), and Titus (2 Cor 8:23).

¹⁴² Viola, *So You Want to Start*, 127.

¹⁴³ See, for example, Simson, *Houses that Chang the World*, xviii, 94, 110–23.

¹⁴⁴ This author sees several problems with this five-fold ministry structure. First, it ignores biblical teaching that the apostolic and prophetic gifts were only necessary for the foundation stage of the church (i.e., their offices ceased with the completion of the NT—see Eph 2:20; Heb 2:3, 4; 2 Cor 12:12). Second, with the completion of the NT canon, God is no longer giving new and direct revelation to his church today. Third, the exact role of the evangelist, prophet, and apostle today is not clearly described in Scripture—proponents do much speculation.

¹⁴⁵ See Matt 20:25–27.

¹⁴⁶ Hadaway, Dubos, and Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, 207–16. For a helpful chart contrasting these two authority systems, see pp. 210–11.

cates, who have often objected strongly to dominating professional clergy, have themselves fallen prey to a similar malady—lay leaders who over-control! In all fairness, however, this incorrect view of shepherding is not inherently connected with the house church. Many house churches do not share this ideology.

Theological Drift

The *tendency toward doctrinal heresy* is another potential problem with house churches. Small, pastorless groups can easily become doctrinally or even socially unmoored. Thom Rainer, who has researched and written extensively on church growth, says, “I have no problem with where a church meets, [but] I do think that there are some house churches that, in their desire to move in different directions, have perhaps moved from biblical accountability.”¹⁴⁷ This is not a problem unique to house churches but is one common to any independent group which rejects dominant cultural patterns. A leader with a strong charismatic personality is often followed with unquestioning loyalty by the members; but if such a leader begins to drift toward an odd doctrinal stance, there may be no one to challenge him. In extreme cases, home churches dominated by magnetic but unorthodox leaders can shade over the line into cults.¹⁴⁸

A few of the doctrinal concerns and charismatic excesses seen among some house church networks have already been mentioned. Mike Steele acknowledges that their house church planting strategy has now “incorporated signs and wonders into our gatherings.”¹⁴⁹ Dennis McCallum, a leader of Xenos Christian Fellowship’s network of over 100 house churches in Columbus, warns against an unwarranted emphasis on revival and more showy, spectacular methods in order to grow a home group:

The ideology that places revival as the key to success in the [home] church can be destructive to the notion of a church planting movement. People may look to such supernatural events for a shortcut. This expectation drains energy from regular daily evangelism, living for God, and disciple making, which seem mundane and unremarkable by comparison. Church multiplication takes daily effort, often exerted in very non-showy, quiet ways, such as building up fellow believers and engaging in friendship evangelism as a way of life. Consistency is essential.¹⁵⁰

Viola, contends that the current clamoring for “restoration” of the apostle and other “five-fold ministry” gifts is counter-productive. The “Restoration Movement,” as some are calling it, “has been tried and found wanting.” He feels that what is needed in home church networks is not restoration, not even revival, but revolution—a revolution in our modern “Christian” mindset and church practices rooted in first-century biblicism.¹⁵¹ In

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Rita Healy and David Van Biema, “There’s No Pulpit Like Home” *TIME*, 6 March 2006), <<http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1167737,00.html>> (accessed 19 June 2006)

¹⁴⁸ For validation see Viola’s list of eleven “streams” within the HC movement: “Some Streams of House Church” (Present Testimony Ministry, unpublished paper).

¹⁴⁹ Mike Steele, “BELLS Model is Biblical Dynamic and Reproductive,” *DAWN Report* (March 2004): 7.

¹⁵⁰ David McCallum, “Urban Home Church Planting at Xenos,” <<http://www.xenos.org/CLASSES/leadership/urbanhousechurchplanting.htm>> (accessed 19 June 2006).

¹⁵¹ Viola, *So You Want to Start*, 25–27.

sum: This need to sustain spiritual vitality without “going off the deep end” theologically will be a constant battle in many North American house churches.

House church groups which are planted by/with leaders soundly trained in theology, which do not place too much authority in the hands of a few leaders, and which are part of a regional or citywide collection of house churches—or even a larger conservative denomination—are less likely to suffer from theological drift. Canadian house church leader, Zdero, who admits that they are “more vulnerable to bad theology and behavior” recommends house churches become a part of peer networks to keep them on track and to promote health/growth.¹⁵²

Administrative Challenges

A fifth problem area for all home church ministries is the ongoing practical challenge of *how to organize and schedule the meetings*. The informal nature of the house church setting lends itself to certain administrative problems not faced by traditional churches. First, there is the quandary of where to meet. Some home groups rotate their meeting site, which may cause communication and scheduling problems. Other groups only meet in one location—usually the leader’s home or at the home of a member who has a large living room. This is more efficient but does put demands upon the host family and may tend to cause burn-out over time. Some growing groups may not have a member family with a large enough residence to accommodate the group.¹⁵³ Other administrative problems include struggling to start on time each week, continuing too late, and the tendency of informal group meetings to get side-tracked. To resolve these issues a group needs a fairly strong leader and a flexible, but set, order of service. Another recurrent problem is finding satisfactory arrangements for the children. Various solutions have been utilized. The three most common are integration, specialization, and parental apprenticeship.¹⁵⁴

Zoning restrictions have prompted more than a few larger house church meetings to disband because of complaints by neighbors or the authorities. Smaller meetings may go unnoticed or even be ignored by the community residents; larger groups obviously run a high risk of objections from neighbors. Unfortunately, in an increasing number of North American communities, city planners are using zoning regulations to stifle the ministries of churches. This may be a battleground issue in the future. Governmental officials can seek to enact and enforce new zoning ordinances and then use them to violate the religious liberty of Christian groups deemed undesirable. Churches of all types—house churches included—need to be sensitive to neighborhood concerns.

¹⁵² Zdero, *Global House Church Movement*, 4.

¹⁵³ The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board found that few people wanted to lodge an ongoing church in their homes, and so the burden was disproportionately placed upon the willing families who had adequate accommodations (Hadaway, Dubose, and Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, 228).

¹⁵⁴ Zdero, *Global House Church Movement*, 95–96. Barna (*House Churches Are More Satisfying*), found 64% of house churches have children involved; 41% keep the adults and kids together, while 38% separate them.

Perceptions in North American Culture

Perhaps the greatest drawback with the house church model in North America is the way these simpler church forms are viewed by the non-Christian and even Christian world. Even when a home church is fully biblical in doctrine and practice, millions of American believers will consider their brick, institutionalized, non-multiplying congregation to be a “more biblical model.” Many see church as something one “goes to” rather than God’s people “being” the church. Thus, one of the biggest struggles for the house church is that of recognition. Unchurched and unsaved people in North American culture find it hard to recognize something as church when it doesn’t have a building with a steeple or at least a cross on it. North Americans for the most part have high expectations for professionalism; house churches may seem rather amateurish.

Americans are just beginning to get comfortable with the idea of worshipping and sharing faith experiences primarily in a home setting. Recent research by The Barna Group has found that a growing number seem to be checking out the house church approach but have not made a full commitment to switch from a conventional church to a house church. Their most recent research indicates that half of those currently engaged in an independent home fellowship have been participating for less than three months and 75% have been active for a year or less. Barna feels that this not only indicates rapid growth in U.S. house church activity but that the emerging movement is in a “nascent state.” He admits the “biggest obstacle to the growth of the house church movement is not theological but “cultural.”¹⁵⁵

The perception of house church members themselves is often a problem. They also have been influenced by a culture which may view house churches as Bible studies rather than real churches. How do members respond when asked, “Where do you go to church?” When yet unchurched, they may find the home setting attractive, but now that they have joined the home fellowship and are no longer outsiders, cultural definitions of “church” may pull at them. The house church may now seem too casual, too impermanent. Then, too, some neighbors may misconstrue the purpose of the group, generating gossip and rumor about cults. While none of these cultural definitions have any biblical foundation, they still serve to stigmatize innovative efforts and reinforce traditional church patterns.

A few years ago the then Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention experimented with a house church planting strategy but soon had to abandon their plans because of numerous issues. Once house churches became viable and grew, members wanted to purchase land and build. Why? Because it was found that newly saved members perceived the house church structure as too impermanent. They were afraid of two things: one day their group might dissolve; and being a small group, they would never

¹⁵⁵ Barna found that among professing Christians who do not attend a house church, 57% believe a house church fulfilled “the biblical command to be part of a spiritual community that follows Jesus Christ.” Only one in five dismissed the house church approach as “unbiblical.” See the January 8, 2007 Barna Update: <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=216&Pa>. Accessed 1/9/2007.

be able to employ a full-time “permanent” pastor. In their minds, constructing a church facility “symbolized security and stability.”¹⁵⁶

In conclusion, while these *six challenges* do exist for house churches, all can be overcome. These objections may seem formidable, but many are based on inaccurate perceptions of the house church and the tendency to view all groups as similar in structure and ideology. House church leaders can normally overcome them by patient instruction. The house church may not be for everyone but should not be dismissed as unworkable. It has a definite contribution to make in North American contexts—just as it has around the world.

LESSONS FROM HOUSE CHURCHES

Whether one fully embraces the house church model or not, there are helpful insights which pastors, church planters and mission agencies can learn from the current move toward simpler forms of church. Eight vital lessons are most notable if we are to see truly missional churches in our day.

Being Church

House churches remind us all that it is important for pastors and planters to start with and use right terminology. “Church” should not be recognized as a place but as a way of life. As the people of God, we do not “go to” church—instead we *are* the church!

Simplifying Church

House churches teach us that simpler church life and structures are generally more effective than complex ones. American business corporations have recently seen the value of simplicity. Unfortunately many mission organizations are still mired in unnecessary complexity and are too often guilty of exporting large, Western-style “sanctuary models” of church. Professor of Management Reed Nelson points out that a minimalist structure will help “avoid stifling creativity, spontaneity, and celebration that are the hallmark of successful movements.” He proposes that “it is better not to set up a new structure if an existing one can be used,” and that it is best to seek for correspondence “between local societal patterns and ecclesiastical patterns.”¹⁵⁷ Missionary church planting—whether in North America or globally—would be more effective if we set out to establish smaller “missional model” churches. By keeping organization simple and minimizing the complexity of church *forms*, we will maximize the effectiveness of church *functions*, freeing believers to better do the main thing—make disciples.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Hadaway, Dubose, and Wright, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, 225–27.

¹⁵⁷ Reed E. Nelson, “Five Principles of Indigenous Church Organization: Lessons from a Brazilian Pentecostal Church,” *Missiology* 17, no. 1 (1989): 50.

¹⁵⁸ This is exactly the premise of Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger’s new book, *Simple Church: Returning to God’s Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006). While not promoting HCs, the authors build a strong case from recent nationwide research (with 400 American churches, mostly Southern Baptists?) that growing churches find ways to simplify their structure, eliminate superfluous programs and focus everything that they do upon the main thing, making disciples. I highly recommend this stimulating book.

Focusing on Persons of Peace

The organic church movement takes seriously Jesus' simple strategy in Matthew 10 and Luke 10 where he advocated concentrating one's friendship and ministry in one household—rather than a blanket approach to evangelism of going door-knocking from house to house. People of peace are key people in a community who are spiritually open, generally have good reputations, and have influence. When they become believers, they can then share their faith with their network of friends. Missiologists like Charles Brock and George Patterson agree that finding a person of peace is central to a healthy church-starting strategy. Unfortunately the approach of many North American church planters today is the exact opposite: using mass marketing to blanket as many people as possible in an attempt to get lost people to come to a church meeting. But church planting efforts that emerge out of the households of local, indigenous leaders may be more fruitful in the long run. Paul followed this model while in Corinth by focusing on the home of Priscilla and Aquilla (Acts 18:1–4). Frost and Hirsch point out that using the person of peace mode is more incarnational because “the new believers stay in those networks and with training, nurture, and support can quickly lead friends to Christ, often starting a church ‘out there in the real world’... .”¹⁵⁹ Thus, house churching enables us to incarnate the gospel in the midst of the unchurched and unreached of our world. House church planters show us the benefit of using evangelism and planting models that are reproducible, sustainable, and contextualized.

Discipling Social Networks

House churches also teach us the value of seeking group conversions by sharing the gospel in and through relational networks and cultural systems. This flows out of the person of peace principle. As we have seen, the early church grew because they understood and practiced whole-household (*oikos*) evangelism. This is another positive characteristic of the house church approach which most of the contemporary Western church has lost and needs to recover. Our church planting evangelism would be more fruitful if we would once again focus on parents as the influencers of households and give more attention to infiltrating the social, recreational, and vocational networks in which people are born and live. Societies have differing procedures for making individual and group decisions. Thus, we need to discern the patterns of response to the gospel most fitting for each particular culture.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*, 65.

¹⁶⁰ The Willowbank (Bermuda) Consultation on gospel and culture recognized “the validity of corporate dimensions of conversion as part of the total process, as well as the necessity for each member of the group ultimately to share in it personally” (John R. W. Stott and Robert Coote, eds., “Willowbank Report: Consultation on Gospel and Culture,” in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 328).

Raising Local Leaders

Another crucial lesson learned from house church planters is that we should expect the Lord of Harvest to raise workers from our converts. The workers *for* the harvest must come primarily *from* the harvest (cf. Matt 9:36–37)—not from outside the community. Organic church planters like Cole challenge us all to trust God and believe that in fact *all* the resources for an abundant harvest and for growing a new church (whether it be finances, facilities, or future leaders) are in the harvest. Priority must be given to developing leaders from those we have seen come to Christ and growing in Christ. Cole suggests a harvest mindset will compel us to “leadership farming” not “leadership recruitment.” We must start with the lost: “Start at the beginning, and begin with the end in mind.”¹⁶¹

Being Incarnational

Most traditional churches and church planting efforts today use an *attractional* approach to doing church. The church bids people to *come and hear* the gospel in the holy confines of the church and its community. House churches are built upon a radically different approach—taking the church to where lost people are, living among them, and planting the church on their turf. This more incarnational mindset is based on a *go-to-them* approach to mission and evangelism. The emerging pattern—the “incarnational” approach—stresses “living, eating, and working closely with [the] surrounding community, developing strong links between Christians and not-yet Christians.”¹⁶² The traditional, attractional church could be better described as *extractional*, that is it extracts single converts, one at a time, from the world and incorporates them into the church.¹⁶³ House church planters teach us that to be effective in a postmodern world we must be intentionally incarnational, majoring not on establishing a location for worship but establishing relationships with lost people. The move to more relational-based church planting is a good one because it means “less program, budget, and building” and “more life, community, and gospel.”¹⁶⁴ More incarnational approaches to church planting will enable us to better penetrate North America’s many subcultures and “tribes.”¹⁶⁵ From

¹⁶¹ Cole, *Organic Church*, 205. Another leadership training principle learned from CPM practitioners: “*never do anything by yourself; always bring a brother along with you so you can model and mentor as you go. . . .* The aim is to transfer the driving force for the vision into the hearts and lives of those being reached” (Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World*, 187 (emphasis his).

¹⁶² Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*, 57. Frost and Hirsch further define the incarnational church as one that “does not create sanctified spaces into which unbelievers must come to encounter the gospel. Rather the missional [= incarnational] church disassembles itself and seeps into the cracks and crevices of a society in order to be Christ to those who don’t yet know him” (ibid., 72).

¹⁶³ For an insightful chart comparing extractional with incarnational churches, see Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*, 72.

¹⁶⁴ Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 156.

¹⁶⁵ Frost and Hirsch point out that we are seeing a dramatic fracturing in Western society into a range of subcultures, even in the suburbs: “This is called the subculturalization or tribalization of the West. . . . Churches, like missionaries, will need to understand subcultural mores and folkways and incarnate themselves into the rhythms of each specific people group or ‘tribe’ to which they feel called” (Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*, 65).

house churches, we are learning that starting smaller, targeted, incarnational communities is wiser than using monochrome one-size-fits all planting models.¹⁶⁶

Multiplying Churches

The global church movement reinforces for us in North America the importance of being deliberate about multiplication, not addition. Unless a church movement or denomination intentionally reproduces in every sphere of church life—disciplines, leaders, small groups, and churches—it will eventually die. All church planters must see to it that reproduction is part of the DNA of their new church. The current emphasis on organic churches reminds us that healthy churches reproduce. And that our goal must be to see planted churches begin spontaneously (naturally) reproducing themselves. This dual goal of rapid and natural reproduction contrasts sharply with the traditional understanding that a church must “first grow large enough and mature enough to be able to afford to sacrifice some of its members to begin a new work.”¹⁶⁷ The truly missional-incarnational church thinks in terms of multiplying new communities of faith, rather than the current emphasis on filling as many pews as possible. A healthy church sees itself as part of an ongoing (baton-passing, faith-passing) process, not as an end in itself. The goal must be to reproduce, not just sustain. Planters must think about church as a movement, rather than as an institution; as an organism, not just an organization. But for reproduction to regularly occur, we must be sure the church models being used are simple enough to be easily passed on.

Networking Resources

A final lesson the house church movement can teach us is the benefit of networking. Individual cells in a body cannot function alone for long and will eventually die without being interconnected with other cells. As noted earlier, most home churches today have learned that they must form networks in order to pray, plan, encourage one another, and share resources.¹⁶⁸ To “choose isolation, independence and inwardness” will prevent house churches from “becoming a real movement that deeply impacts their city, region, or nation with the gospel of Christ.”¹⁶⁹ Churches of all forms need to heed that call.

¹⁶⁶ For more on the need for incarnational rather than attractional church planting models, see Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches*, 161–69 and Frost and Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come*, 33–59.

¹⁶⁷ Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World*, 195.

¹⁶⁸ Some HCers have now seen the benefit of not only banding together but having a central leadership group for all their area HCs. McCallum explains that their Columbus HC network works together “for special cooperative, joint projects and programs.” These include: (1) large meetings where all the HC come together to hear a gifted teacher; (2) mission-sending efforts; (3) ministry to the poor; (4) ministries to children and students (these are more effective when program-based they feel); (5) counseling and support ministries; (6) sharing expertise in HC ministry; (7) sharing theological expertise (McCallum, “Urban Home Church Planting at Xenos”).

¹⁶⁹ Zdero, *Global House Church Movement*, 106.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

I began this study as an objective but somewhat skeptical observer but finished with the belief that the house church has a definite contribution to make to the advance of the Christian faith, not only around the world but here in North America. If nothing else, simple church models should make us aware that there are many ways and many settings in which we can worship God and “be church.” Our structures and methods can certainly be hindrances to the gospel, yet they should not be. Church planters, mission organizations, and established church leaders need to be open to new approaches which help us fulfill the Great Commission. The home church is one such innovation around which a movement seems to be forming. As with all movements, there is some instability and some bad examples. But that should in no way deter us from seeing the obvious benefits of the house church model.

A growing number of sincere believers today are convinced that the house church model is more effective for growth and reproduction in their particular place and time but that does not necessarily mean it is “more biblical.” Though the New Testament does indicate that early believers often gathered together in private homes, it does not mandate this form for future generations. On the other hand, Scripture seems to allow for a variety of forms of church life within a basic congregational set-up. Church history shows that the house church has virtually been non-existent in some cultures, societies and ages. This may indicate God works through many different forms and models of church life.

The house church movement is stimulating many North American church leaders to go back to the gospels, back to Jesus, in an attempt to rediscover the beauty of Christ’s kingdom and its relationship to the church in this age. That is good news. If the house church movement is about practicing and imitating Jesus’ life in our neighborhoods, eating with the unlovely, practicing hospitality, discovering together the truths of God’s word, engaging in the classical disciplines, caring, admonishing, encouraging, and loving one another, then I am encouraged and supportive. If it means a departure from biblical ecclesiology, with a resultant weakened church fellowship, I will be less excited.

The current return to simpler forms of church holds at the same time both great promise and grave dangers for the future growth of the North American church. We need to be open yet discerning to what the Lord of Harvest may be doing in our day. If He is rising up dynamic new forms of church which are biblical in doctrine and practice while evidencing true community, then we need to welcome and affirm them. Why? Because the church is central to God’s plan for Christ’s name and fame to be known among the nations. But if the “revolution” means people are leaving biblical churches or leaving in a biblically improper manner, then we should not celebrate.

The house church seems to be an effective way of reaching North Americans immersed in the postmodern culture we live in today, a culture generally hostile to traditional Christian practice. The main attraction of the house church springs from its simplicity, community, and courageous faith. If futurologists are on target, house church networks will greatly accelerate in North America during the next fifty years. There are new signs—along with Barna’s bold predictions—that micro churches could be a significant part in the future of gospel advance in North America.

As a church planting coach, this author has not yet fully embraced the house church planting model¹⁷⁰ because other models seem to still be effective in our culture. There is insufficient evidence to validate that the house church model is able to break through the North America culture of lostness. I am personally adapting a “wait and see” attitude regarding the ability of house churches to become a large movement acceptable to the majority of North Americans. As evangelistic beachheads they are essential but for longer term discipleship, social impact, and leadership development larger structures seem necessary. House churches cannot do everything sanctuary churches can, but if they are organized biblically they can do what is essential with excellence.

¹⁷⁰ I am proposing to potential partner churches in New York City that we prayerfully consider utilizing the house model as Project Jerusalem begins to plant new churches in the metro area in the future. One of the greatest barriers to planting new churches in NYC is the lack of available and affordable properties for churches to use for public worship. House churches have great potential to thrive in an urban setting like NYC because they seek to assure continued growth through multiplication by avoiding the limitations imposed by ever-expanding facilities. Furthermore, because they would be deeply rooted in the local neighborhood and be locally-led, they would normally be viewed as culturally-fitting (“indigenous”). They would allow for creativity, encourage friendship evangelism, and facilitate leadership development. In a city setting people can readily use public transportation or even walk to a neighbor’s house. Parking would not be a problem.

Appendix A: House Church Web Sites

Campus Church Networks (Jaeson Ma)

www.campuschurch.net

www.metroallnations.com

Canadian House Church Network

www.outreach.ca/cpc/housechurches.htm

Church Multiplication Associates (CMA, Neil Cole)

www.cmaresources.org

Church Planting Movements (David Garrison)

www.churchplantingmovements.com

www.imb.org/cpm

DAWN Ministries (Jim Montgomery, etc)

www.dawnministries.org

Dove Christian Fellowship International (Larry Kreider)

www.dcfi.org

Fellowship of House Church Planters, RI (Dick Scoggins)

<http://www.fcpt.org>

www.dickscoggins.com

Home Church Dot Org

<http://www.home-church.org>

Home Church Network

www.homechurch.org

House Church Canada

www.housechurch.ca

House 2 House Ministries & Magazine (Tony & Felicity Dale)

www.house2house.tv

Mentor and Multiply (George Patterson)

<http://MentorAndMultiply.com>

New Testament Restoration Foundation (Steve Atkerson, etc)

www.ntrf.org

Open Church Ministries (James Rutz)

www.openchurch.com

www.megashift.org

Outside-the-Box Press (Robert Lund)

www.outside-the-box-press.com

Robert Fitts Ministries

www.robertfitts.com

Simple Church

<http://www.simplechurch.org>

Wolfgang Simson:

<http://www.simsonwolfgang.de/>

World Access Network

<http://www.worldaccessnet.com>

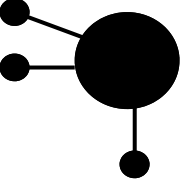
Xenos Christian Fellowship

www.xenos.org

Youth with a Mission (YWAM – Kevin Sutter, etc)

www.InternationalExpress.org

Appendix B: Comparison Chart of Three Classic Church Models

	Traditional Church	Cell Church	House Churches
Organizational Groups	Church <i>WITH</i> small groups	Church <i>OF</i> small groups	Church <i>IS</i> small groups
Organizational Diagram	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Hub</i></p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Black Circle = Large Group</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Hub and Spokes</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Black Dots = Small Groups</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Network</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Black Dots = House Churches</p>
Size of Meetings	Large Group with some Small Groups	Equal Emphasis on both Large and Small Groups	Small Groups: Primary HC Network: Supplement
Format of Meeting	Programmed Ritual and Passive Audience	Large Group: Programmed Small Group: Open	Open: Participatory and Interactive
Purpose of Meeting	One-man show	Large Group: One-man show Small Group: Mutual Benefit	Mutual Benefit
Location of Meetings	Church Building	Large Group: Church Building Small Group: Homes	Homes
Day of Meeting	Sunday	Large Group: Sunday Small Group: Any Day	Sunday and/or Every Day
Duration of Meetings	Fixed (1-2 Hours)	Large Group: Usually Fixed Small Group: Flexible	Flexible
Broader Connection	Denomination	Denomination	HC Network
Leadership Structure	Concentrated in One Person	Pyramid Structure & Leader's Ladder	Flat Structure & Leadership Teams

Appendix C: Sub-Cultures of House Churches

Most of the groups that fly under the flag of "house church" or "NT church" fit neatly into one of the following categories:

The Glorified Bible Study. This brand of house church is typically chaired by an ex-clergyman or aspiring Bible teacher usually facilitating a round-table discussion of the Scriptures. Meetings are dominated by Bible expositions which often descend into fruitless debates. Those members who are not theologically inclined have a rather thin participation.

The Special Interest Group. These home groups make their focal point for assembling a common interest like home school, home birth, the keeping of Jewish feasts, a particular eschatological view, a pro forma pattern of church service, organic farming, personal prophecy, "Holy Ghost laughter," social justice, or some other issue, fad, or thing—even HC itself!

The Personality Cult. Members of these groups center their universe around a gifted man or woman. It may be a dead apostle whose writings act as the exclusive medium for the group's identity, beliefs, and practices. More often, the object of attention is a Christian leader who founds the church and perpetually stays resident within it. While the gifted personality often has a genuine desire to see the Body build itself up, his mere presence obstructs this spiritual dynamic. He is typically blind to the fact that he has unwittingly fostered an unhealthy dependence upon himself.

The Bless-Me-Club. At bottom, this is a narcissistic community—a spiritual ghetto. The meetings are insular and highly charismatic. The group functions as a spiritual fueling station for burned-out Christians in need of an emotional fix. Churches of this ilk are dominated by navel-gazing individualists. Thus its members typically bail out whenever the group faces a rough thicket.

The Socially Amorphous Party. Home groups typically comprised of 4 to 8 people who nebulously meet in a living room to chat over tea and cookies. They rarely attain critical mass due to a lack of vision and purpose. They like to speak bulbously about Jesus being present whenever "two or three are gathered together." However, they usually fold before they even begin to understand why they exist. If they do not fold, their meetings become progressively sterile as the years roll by.

The Disgruntled Malcontent Society. Comprised of ex-church derelicts and recycled Christians, these groups happily assemble to lick their wounds and slam the "spiritually abusive" institutional church. Their meetings are permeated with an atmosphere of pessimism, cynicism, and veiled bitterness. Tragically, after the members tire of attacking the organized church, they begin to chew up one another. Thus they find themselves taken by

the same spirit they set out to oppose. This form of house church attracts Christians who are deeply wounded and have never learned to trust others.

The Unwritten Liturgy Driven Church. These groups clearly stand outside the stream of institutional Christianity. But they often do not meet in a home. Many gather in a rented building or a "meeting hall." The dominating weakness of their gatherings is the lurking presence of an unwritten liturgy. The ironclad liturgy, which is practiced perfunctorily every week, is never questioned or changed.

Adapted from Frank Viola's book *So You Want to Start a House Church* (2003), p. 114-116.

Appendix D: 'Streams' Within the House Church Movement

Stream 1: Anti-Formalists. Those influenced by Gene Edwards. This stream is often referred to as the "radical wing" of the House Church movement. These groups tend to be anti-formalist to the extent that they claim no leadership, no order, no structure, no organization, etc.

Stream 2: Deeper Lifers. Those influenced by Watchman Nee and/or Stephen Kaung. These groups are typically centered around Christ, His eternal purpose, and the Scriptures. Most follow the teaching (some loosely, others strictly) outlined in Watchman Nee's "The Normal Christian Church Life..." Deeper life themes are often stressed.

Stream 3: Heavenly Churchmen. Those influenced by T. Austin-Sparks. These groups tend to be virtually identical to the above, but are inclined to stress the heavenly and spiritual nature of the church more than the practical and earthly side.

Stream 4: The 'Local Church'. Those influenced by Witness Lee (Living Stream Ministry). This camp is ardent in its belief that Lee now has the "Divine baton" and is the vessel that God is presently using to recover His purpose and the truth about "the local church." These groups were more militant in the 1970's (often "taking over" other weaker home fellowships) than they are now; yet many still regard them as exclusive and divisive.

Stream 5: Fundamentalists. Those who are very conservative in their biblical orientation. This strand of House Church tends to rigidly stress a specific pattern for meeting, regarding it as the pattern to follow. Most hold to Reformation theology right down the line and/or a strictly literal interpretation of Scripture.

Stream 6: Progressive Evangelicals. Those who are neo-evangelical (or post-evangelical) in their orientation. These House Churches tend to color their interpretation of Scripture with modern Biblical scholarship and often contribute fresh insights to old questions. They are highly relational...

Stream 7: The Health & Wealthers. Those associated with Word-faith teaching. Although few in number, these House Churches (as well as a network directed by C. Alan Martin) are built around the prosperity-faith teachings of Ken Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Fred Price, Charles Capps, *et. al.*

Stream 8: The End-Time Remnant. Those influenced by the Sonship teachings of the Latter Rain. Sam Fife and/or George Warnock are often regarded as the fathers of this camp. Many of these groups meet in international communities, are self-sufficient, and often act as refugees (sic) for people who need extreme help and can't make it in the streets. They are Pentecostal in nature, Adventist in outlook, and place a heavy emphasis on the preparation of God's end-time remnant for the time when the "sons of God are manifested."

Stream 9: The 3-H Camp. Those who circle their lives around the 3 H's (home church, home school, and home birth). Many are influenced by the teachings of Bill Gothard and believe that God wants virtually all Christians to raise large families which are home schooled. According to some, these groups have often become their own subculture, wholly disconnecting themselves from the larger culture (including Christian) and from anything that is conventional. Some House Churches of this ilk have a penchant for keeping the Jewish customs.

Stream 10: The Independents. This stream has known little-to-no human influence (consequently, folks who swim here have probably never heard of any of the above streams). These groups are characterized by a sovereign leading of God's Spirit to meet according to New Testament principles.

Stream 11: The Eclectics. Those who swim in two or more of the above streams.

Analysis: Streams described in numbers six and ten certainly represent N.T. Christians seeking to be faithful in becoming a biblical expression of God's church in their local context. Some within streams five and nine are also Bible believing Christians, though at times off balance. Stream seven adherents are charismatic believers outside mainstream evangelicalism. Other groups seem to be teaching heretical doctrines or are fringe groups or sects. The lesson: it is unfair to lump all house churches into one category. We must exercise discernment!

Adapted from: Frank A. Viola, "Some Streams of the House Church," Present Testimony Ministry; 1405 Valley Place; Brandon, FL 33510; Email: Fviola3891@aol.com. Names given to each camp above as well as the analysis are mine (Ken Davis, BBS), not Viola's.

Appendix E: Probable New Testament House Churches

Location	House Church Host(ess)	References	Circumstances & Comments
Jerusalem	Mary (John Mark's Mom)	Acts 12:12 cf. 2:46; 5:42	The first church met in various homes daily. Mary had large household w/ servants.
	Unknown	Acts 2:1-2 cf. 1:15; Mk.14:13-16	Met in "large upper room" where 1 st Lord's supper held—later became prayer room for 120?
	James	Acts 12:17; 15:13	Leader of Jerusalem church may have led a Hebraic HC
	Unknown	Acts 6:1	Hellenistic Jewish believers may have met separately from Hebrew Christians.
Philippi	Lydia	Acts 16:14,15	1 st HC in Europe! As successful businesswoman probably had a large house. Jailer's home (16:34) maybe also used as HC
Corinth	Gaius	Rom 16:23	Same person as Titus—Justus? cf. Acts 18:7,11 House next to synagogue A Roman
	Priscilla & Aquila	Acts 18:1-4	Tentmakers—Paul lived/worked with Paul's loyal helpers "Prisca" (Roman) was leader?
	Stephanus	I Cor. 16: 5,15 Cf. 1:15-18	1 st household to convert in Achaia Personally baptized by Paul Whole HC given to unselfish <i>diakonia</i>
	Chloe?	I Cor. 1:11	A well-to-do HC? She owned the house
	Unknown	I Cor. 1:12	Possible four camps divided over doctrine & each had a HC: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Paulists ▪ Peterists ▪ Appollosites ▪ Christ's Ones
Ephesus	Priscilla & Aquila	I Cor. 16:19 Acts 18:2 Romans 16:4 Acts 18:24-26	Expelled from Rome so go to Corinth for tentmaking Risked their lives (& business) to help Paul They disciplined Appollos in their HC
Rome	Priscilla & Aquila	Rom. 16:4-5	Co-pastors of HC? Epistle was to be read to "all" the HC? (1:7)
	Aristobulus	Rom. 16:10	
	Narcissus	Rom. 16:11	
	Unknown	Rom. 16:14	Cluster of 5 named believers & "brothers"
Colossae	Unknown	Rom. 16:15	Cluster of 5 and "saints"
	Philemon	Philem. 1:2 Cf. Col. 4:7-9	Wife=Apphia, Archippus=son Onesimus sent back to Paul via Tychicus
Laodecia	Nympha	Col. 4:15	HC planted by Ephaphras cf. Col. 1:7; 4:12-13
	Unknown	Col. 4:15-16	Philemon's HC was to circulate Colosse letter to them
Troas	Unknown	Acts 20: 5-10	An upstairs HC in an apartment. Eutychus fell asleep in window, etc. HC "broke bread"—worship No preaching but discussion (20:7)?
Thessalonica	Unknown	I Thes. 5:27	Paul exhorted city church to circulate letter to all the HC's?