

The Global Spiritual Trend We Can't Ignore

Last weekend, I preached in a small but growing church in central Sri Lanka. There was no sign outside the building because it's a private residence located in a crowded neighborhood. Most of the people who came to this meeting either walked or arrived in motorized rickshaws, so no parking lot was needed. The worship team consisted of two young men playing guitars and a third guy on a box drum.

The small living room of this modest home had been transformed into a sanctuary, and the 40 or so people who came to worship sat on plastic chairs or on the stairway. I didn't need a microphone. This church doesn't use a sound system, a projection screen or fancy lighting. Yet God's presence was tangible, especially when several people stood to pray for the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The pastor of this congregation (I'll call him Siresh) works a regular job during the week—he doesn't take a salary from the church's limited income. That's fine with him because he wants to be in the marketplace all week, getting to know the community. He also regularly shares his faith when he plays cricket with a group of non-Christian guys.

Siresh doesn't expect his church to stay in a house forever. He plans to grow. But he also plans to train and release his members to start more new churches—in a Buddhist nation where churches were bombed by Muslim terrorists on Easter Sunday in April.

Researchers say what Siresh is doing represents the future of the global church. In places like Iran, Algeria, India and China, thousands of ordinary people are starting small churches that don't fit the traditional mold. Most of them are

not affiliated with recognized denominations, so it's impossible to count them. These organic church groups meet not only in homes but in coffee shops, offices, campus dorms, hotels, apartment building lobbies, front yards or under trees. And they are multiplying rapidly.

House churches are certainly not a new concept. Jesus had His first meeting with his disciples in a home (see John 1:38-39), the first Jewish believers of Christ met "house to house" (Acts 2:46) and the first Gentile church began in the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. But in recent years, missions researchers have noticed that non-traditional "disciple-making movements," or DMMs, are exploding around the world, especially in countries where Christians are persecuted.

This trend was best explained at first by David Garrison, a Southern Baptist who wrote *Church Planting Movements* in 1999 and *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* in 2014. That same year, missionary strategist David Watson wrote *Contagious Disciple Making*. Both men did a masterful job of documenting this global church growth that is happening under the radar.

As I was worshipping with the small group of believers in Sri Lanka, I could sense that the Holy Spirit is calling the American church to study and learn from these humble foreign believers who have reclaimed a Book of Acts model. This doesn't mean our traditional churches should go away or that we all will stop meeting in church buildings. But the wind is shifting. Methods we used just 10 years ago have become embarrassingly ineffective. Our "box" may work for some people, but we need fresh strategies.

In the United States, we've developed a church model that discourages authentic New Testament discipleship. We assume that just because we have cool stage lights, huge projection screens and contemporary worship music, we are on the cutting edge of what God is doing. But the truth is we are stuck in an

old-fashioned rut.

We are building monolithic, top-down structures instead of spreading the gospel outwardly in multiple directions. We are afraid to empower people to branch out into their own ministries because we need everyone to stay in their padded seats to support a system that is expensive and underperforming.

I suspect God is about to prune the Western church so we can bear more fruit. The Lord of the harvest wants His church to grow exponentially. Adopting these new methods will infuriate the religious establishment, but we can't allow status quo thinking to keep us in the box. We need new wineskins to reach our changing culture. Our brothers and sisters overseas have a lesson for us.