

Small is the New Big

Making sense of the diverse house church movement currently sweeping across the U.S.

There is a major shift going on across the church landscape of North America. God is placing the church back into the hands of His ordinary people. Not church with buildings and professional leadership, but rather intentionally small groups of disciples, led by ordinary people, meeting in homes or wherever life happens. They are known as simple, organic or house churches. (Most people use the terms interchangeably.)

The church meeting in a house is no new phenomenon; there have been house churches ever since the book of Acts. Many of our current legacy churches—the term we prefer for traditional churches because we value the legacy they passed on to us—began in homes. However, these house churches aren't seeking to “grow up” and move into a building. They have a theology of staying small (usually fewer than 20 people) and multiplying into many different locations.

Though the house church movement has grown globally for years, in America this current move of the Holy Spirit began taking off in the 1990s—and for somewhat pragmatic reasons. God uses all kinds of church, yet during this time more people began to meet as church in their homes, in restaurants, in workplaces, in college dorms and in other “everyday” locations. For a long time, everyone thought they were the only ones. Then we began to discover each other.

House2House, the ministry we helped found, played a small part in this. In 2000, two leaders of house church networks in Central Texas approached Tony, my husband, and me with the idea of a magazine to provide resources for the developing house church movement. For a few years, we produced a physical magazine; now it's a Web-based ministry, , seeking to help any

church or group of people that desires to move toward a more organic form of disciple-making and church life. This ministry has given us the incredible privilege of a front seat in the arena of what God is doing with simple/organic churches around the nation as people contact us with their stories and questions.

Only 15 years ago, house churches in America were almost unheard of; we would've had difficulty identifying more than 200 to 300. Today the Pew Research Center reports that 9 percent of Protestants in the United States "attend services" in homes. Studies in 2008 and 2010 by the Barna Group estimate that 6 million adults attend some form of simple church. While some of these people also are part of a legacy church, this is a huge shift—and one only the Holy Spirit could have produced.

There is no central organization to what is going on. There are no superstars. There are no mega-conferences to attend. In fact, it's difficult to see why the movement has such extraordinary influence. Yet the interest in this "new sociological phenomenon," involving people from diverse theological backgrounds, has stretched even beyond the church to the secular media.

There are, perhaps, three main reasons for this attention:

1) *People are recognizing that the center of Christianity has shifted from the West to continents such as Asia, and that house church movements are often the vehicle God is using to produce extraordinary growth.* Most of us are aware of house churches in China, but India's growth may have overtaken it. We have friends there whose network of house churches saw more than 750,000 baptisms on the Day of Pentecost in 2011! The book *T4T* by Steve Smith and Ying Kai describes a church-planting movement in a Southeast Asian country that has documented more than 1.7 million baptisms and 150,000 new church starts since 2001. Church-planting or disciple-making movements are impacting many nations, including some that are

normally hostile to the gospel.

2) *Current economic challenges are forcing churches to rethink their missions strategy.* Some legacy churches are having difficulty meeting their budgets, forcing them to vacate costly premises or lay off staff members. House churches that require little or no finance become very attractive.

3) *Simply put, it's a sovereign move of God.* Although a few adopt house church patterns because of disillusionment with the establishment, it seems that God Himself is challenging many to embrace its principles.

Redefining Church

Most Christians accept that real church isn't the building but still think of it as the event—the sacred hour on Sunday morning. The Bible often describes church as a family: God is our Father; fellow believers are our brothers and sisters. Family isn't something we go to, although healthy families get together often. Instead, it's something we *are*, defined by our relationships and shared lives. In this smaller context, we can easily obey the “one anothers” the New Testament describes.

The basic building block of church is the “two or three” with Jesus in the midst (Matt. 18: 16-20). The presence of Jesus makes it church. In the informality of meeting in a home, with Jesus as the focus, disciples are made and lives transformed. Simple/organic church implies a 24/7 non-religious kingdom lifestyle in which there is no sacred/secular divide; all of life is to be lived for Jesus. We are just as “spiritual” at work or playing sports as when we are gathered together. Without multiple meetings to attend each week, there is more time to get to know our non-believing neighbors too.

Within simple/organic church, then, we need one key skill: listening to Jesus and obeying what He says. Both mission and community will follow.

For example, at one gathering we spent 15 minutes individually asking Jesus what He wanted to say to our church. God revealed the same message to more than half the people through Scriptures, ideas and prophetic words. It was exemplified by a vision our daughter had: a fruit tree with a group of people around it that became multiple fruit trees with many groups. That word has since become a reality as daughter and even granddaughter churches have emerged.

Leading Like Jesus

We must remember that Jesus is the head of His church—and we must treat Him as such. As A.W. Tozer asked, “Is Jesus Lord, or merely a beloved symbol?” Does He have the title but no power? Is He the true head (see Col. 1:15-20)?

The answer to these questions has shaped and transformed most of those who are part of the simple/organic church movement, particularly when it comes to leadership. In Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus essentially says: “You know how leaders in the world rule and exercise authority.” We do—it’s hierarchical. “Not so with you,” He continues. “Whoever wants to be first must be a servant and slave.”

In God’s kingdom, servants are leaders. God trusts leaders who have died to their own ambitions and desire for limelight, and who are looking to lay down their lives—no empire building, no control and no glory. Leadership is functional, not positional. And within the context of the church, a leader equips others for the work of ministry (see Eph. 4:12).

Keep It Simple!

Complex things tend to break down; simple things are easily reproducible. Within the house church movement, simplicity applies to everything. If we want to see multiplication, we need to model patterns that ordinary people can duplicate. The Bible is our textbook—our authoritative guide for faith and practice.

This especially applies to meetings. By basing our times together on Acts 2:42, which stresses getting into the Word, fellowship, food and prayer, we enable every member to participate. First Corinthians 14:26 says when you come together, everyone has a contribution to make. Everyone is important—including children—in this practical outworking of the priesthood of all believers.

For example, our church recently gathered around a “build-a-salad” meal. Many shared what God had done in their lives that week. We broke into even smaller groups to study the Bible so everyone could participate and pray for each other. A young man who was with us for the first time was profoundly moved and surrendered his heart to the Lord. We ended the evening by baptizing him in our hot tub.

Mission Is Crucial

God has chosen us as His ambassadors in this world that desperately needs Him. Jesus told us to make disciples; churches are the natural result. Many people won’t darken the doors of our church buildings, but they’ll talk about Jesus if we go to them. Some describe this as liquid church. Just as spilled water flows everywhere, when we *go out* rather than inviting people *in*, we can reach into every crack and crevice of society.

For example, a long-standing men’s prayer meeting decided to meet in a coffeehouse rather than their home. The very first week another customer noticed them and asked for prayer, and they introduced him to Jesus. In the next few years, as more customers became believers, up to 50 gathered there. For them, that was church.

In Luke 10, Jesus commanded the 70 to pray and to go. He told them how to recognize the person He had prepared. An encounter with a God who meets people at their point of need gave the disciples the opportunity to talk about the kingdom.

These principles are being used to start simple/organic churches here in the U.S. as well. If someone becomes a believer and we bring him into our church, we soon Christianize him. Yet we've only won one person. It's more effective to meet with him and his friends and family and to watch a church emerge in the harvest.

What About ...

Believers unfamiliar with house churches typically ask about the logistical side of things, such as:

What about finances? With no overhead, house churches have little need of resources, and most give away around 90 percent of their finances. For example, the Association of Home Churches in Killeen, Texas, has been able to give away more than \$1.5 million to missions and the poor since its inception in 1992.

What about kids? Children are as much a part of the body of Christ as adults, and they love to be included. They can suggest worship songs; the older ones can read Scriptures; they can lay hands on people and pray for them. Remember, they don't have a junior Holy Spirit.

But they are kids, and there are times when other activities need to be arranged for them. Jesus knows their needs and will guide you on what to do.

What about heresy? History shows that heresy usually starts at the top where strong leaders have influence over many. Revival is usually a grass-roots phenomenon. The danger is minimized in simple church because everyone accepts Scripture as their authority. Though each house church is structurally autonomous, a strong relational connection with other churches in the region helps prevent problems.

Influencers of the Movement

In 1998, Wolfgang Simson published *Houses that Change the World* on the Internet. It spread like wildfire among pioneering simple/organic churches. Many of these people became friends when Simson spoke in our home in early 2001. Similar principles were rediscovered in the writings of Roland Allen, a missionary of the early 1900s who expounded methods as revolutionary in his day as ours.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to missionaries, particularly from the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptists, who have pioneered church-planting movements and shared with us the principles they learned. The wisdom and insights of David Garrison, Curtis Sergeant and David Watson (CityTeam International) are invaluable.

Church Multiplication Associates, led by Neil Cole, has wide influence. Through its Greenhouse trainings, more than 40,000 people worldwide have been taught how to make disciples from those who don't yet know the Lord and gather them into organic churches. Cole has written many books, including *Church 3.0*.

The writings of Frank Viola and George Barna, particularly *Pagan Christianity?*, *Reimagining Church* and *Revolution* have challenged many to reevaluate our traditions to ensure they are biblical. Viola is passionate about the church as the bride of Christ and encourages us to keep Jesus central. A "community of practice for house church leaders" called Luke 10, run by John White () equips and connects these emerging leaders around the world. And groups such as Campus Renewal Ministries and Student CPx emphasize 24-hour prayer and train students to start churches on campus.

Problem Spots

House churches are not without problems. Many people who come from existing churches have merely exchanged their pew for a sofa. They do what they've always known: Someone leads the worship while another gives a talk. They may have more sense of community, but they haven't moved to the place where the

Holy Spirit leads and guides their times together. Since *house church* has become something of a buzzword, some legacy churches have changed the name of their home groups to house churches without a change in DNA.

From the mountaintop of legacy church, people can see the summit of simple/organic church and many assume it's possible to cross a bridge between the two. What they fail to observe is the valley: a process of dying to the good things of legacy church. There's no professional worship, no thought-provoking sermons, no programs for kids or teens, and no one else to make the decisions. Dying to these is neither quick nor painless, and some fail to push through the process.

Into the Future

House church is not the end goal. As God's kingdom increasingly becomes the center of our attention, the distinctions that used to separate believers fade into insignificance. In 2006, a deliberate dialogue began between some mega- and micro-churches to explore how to cooperate and synergistically strengthen the body of Christ. Some megachurches are using missional communities—effectively simple/organic churches—as a means of penetrating their communities. Their conferences, such as Verge and Exponential, feature speakers like Alan Hirsch and Neil Cole to teach missional/organic principles.

Whole denominations are beginning to see simple/organic church as a viable strategy for church planting in this country. Many mission agencies and sending churches no longer plant traditional, Western-style churches in other nations, but simple reproducing organic churches that meet in homes.

What does all this mean? Maybe the body of Christ will end her days where she began—in homes. God is certainly doing something big through the intentionally small. May He alone receive the glory.

Felicity Dale received her medical training at Barts Hospital in London and worked as a family doctor before leaving to look after her own family of four children. She and her husband, Tony, pioneered a church in their medical college and later in London's East End. Co-founder of House2House Ministries, Felicity has authored three books, including *Small Is Big!* with George Barna and Tony.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Throughout 2012, we're celebrating what we call "The 12 Communities of Charisma" and highlighting groups that have made up this magazine's readership for 36-plus years. This month we asked a leading voice of the house church movement, Felicity Dale, to explain the basics of this rapidly expanding segment of the American church.

To learn how house churches have rapidly grown [click here](#).