

Launching house CHURCH Movements

Rad Zdero

Editor's note: many missionaries among unreached peoples are discovering that house churches may be key to discipling these peoples. Yet these same missionaries may have little practical experience with house churches, either in their first or adopted cultures. The following is excerpted by permission from *The Global House Church Movement* (William Carey Library, 2004), where Rad Zdero portrays the challenge of launching house church movements in a variety of cultures. To order copies of this book, see pages 20-21.

This chapter suggests four strategic steps that may help house church trends in various countries become rapidly growing people movements.

1 Starting New House Churches

It has been recognized that numerically the most effective way of reaching people for Christ is the genesis of new churches.

Church growth guru Peter Wagner, based on his research, has stated that "the single most effective way to evangelize is to plant new churches."²³¹ But, how is this to be done? The key

words to best facilitate this process are: *deliberate, rapid, small, saturation, and volunteers.*

Deliberate. A conscious effort should be made to plant New Testament-style house churches among unreached people

pockets. Why should this be done? The reason is simple: new churches don't just happen. Missiological studies have concluded that church planting movements are customarily preceded by a deliberate

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strategy to begin new disciple-making communities.²³² An example of this, described earlier in this book, was the formation of 3500 house churches (totaling 70,000 people) in one Indian state in the late 1990s as the result of an intentional planting strategy.²³³

Rapid. House churches need to blueprint themselves with a healthy emphasis on evangelism, the goal being multiplying their house church into two or sending a team to start a new one. Multiplying house churches typically grow large enough to form a second group within 6-9 months.²³⁴ Otherwise, they may eventually stagnate and fold. Our house church network in Toronto has taken on the realistic slogan "every house church, start a house church, every year". Doing the math, in ten years there could be as many as 1000 house churches in the region. This is a reasonable goal given that doubling a house church only means going from, say, ten to twenty people over the course of an entire year.

Small. House churches should not grow too large before they decide to multiply. Otherwise, the loss of intimacy, openness, and interaction will eventually

compromise the group's attractiveness and plateau the numbers. Currently around the globe, explosive Christian conversion growth from church planting movements is characterized by the reproduction of multiplying house churches and cell groups of no more than 10-30 people.²³⁵ It is known that smaller churches experience a proportionally higher growth rate than larger churches: 1-100



member church (63% growth in 5 years), 100-200 (23%), 200-300 (17%), 300-400 (7%), and over 1000 (4%).²³⁶ In other words, churches tend to plateau in numbers as they get larger, making the necessity of continually sending out groups from existing churches to start new ones obvious. Given their mobility, flexibility, simplicity, and low cost, small house churches are the most strategic choice in reaching the masses.

Saturation-Focused. Every neighbourhood, apartment complex, work setting, and educational institute should be considered as a potential area for a new house church. Conventional churches are not able to penetrate into many segments of society, necessitating a restructuring and re-strategizing towards a more mobile and flexible approach that can do the job. Specifically, the idea gaining attention among mission organizations and missiologists is the planting of a church for every 500 to 1000 people so that as many people as possible will have a Christian community nearby.²³⁷

Volunteer-Led. The weight of responsibility and leadership for emerging house church movements should be placed squarely on the shoulders of grass-roots volunteers, or so-called lay people. Traditional approaches to church planting and missionary work have always employed, quite literally, the services of the professionally trained. However, current research shows that the extent to which rapid church planting movements are birthed depends on the degree to which indigenous non-professionals are encouraged, trained, and released.²³⁸ Professionals — although having a real role as coaches and strategists and mobile overseers of house church networks — need to give way to a new wave of volunteer Christian leaders from the grassroots.

Conscientiously implementing these ingredients builds momentum in exposing more and more people to Christ in the context of house church as well as developing subsequent generations of leaders.

2 House Church Networks

As more home churches emerge, they will need to become part of citywide networks if the momentum is to increase further on local, regional, and national levels.

Ways of Linking. The way these networks function practically was addressed in detail in the previous chapter. But, to recap briefly, there are five concrete ways house churches can be interlocked into a tight web: occasional citywide gatherings of all house churches; house-to-house meeting patterns; monthly leadership training of house church leaders; traveling apostolic coaching of a network; and multiplying networks of networks of house churches.

Biblical Reasons. As detailed in Chapter 3, “Church, First-Century Style”, we saw that house churches of the first century were not an ocean of little groups scattered across the vast reaches of the Roman Empire. There were mechanisms that connected them together into a movement that outlived the very empire that soon would seek to contain its growth. The specific strands used to weave the web of this fledgling movement were mobile apostolic workers who brought vision and instruction to the churches, as well as house-to-house meeting patterns and citywide gatherings that brought into reality the truth of the unity of the body of Christ...

Concerns of Independent House Churches. To some involved in home churches, this idea (of clustering house churches) is tantamount to heresy because of their strong theological conviction regarding the autonomy of each house church. So, any attempt to build a web of house churches working together, on whatever level, will be viewed with suspicion. For some, another factor may be the hurt experienced at the hands of traditional church leadership that was too controlling. However, as argued both from a pragmatic and biblical perspective, some sort of connectivity needs to be present. Consequently, those of us called to this work need to use our own common sense and lessons from the practice of the early church by implementing house church networks that will form the fabric for the emergence of full-fledged movements in successive generations.

3 The Role of Traditional Local Churches

This author proposes that more traditional congregations — which use the “cathedral” model of a special man



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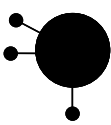
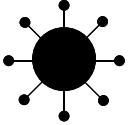
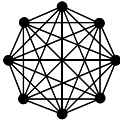
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performing a special service in a special building — can still have a role in the emergence of house church movements. I am personally aware of traditional churches that have already taken the following steps.

COMPARISON CHART OF CHURCH MODELS

The chart contrasts the three classic models of church prevalent today: Traditional Church, Cell Church, and New Testament-style House Churches.

Comparison Chart of Church Models

	TRADITIONAL CHURCH	CELL CHURCH	HOUSE CHURCHES
Organizational Principle	Church <i>WITH</i> small groups	Church <i>OF</i> small groups	Church <i>IS</i> small groups
Organizational Diagram	<p><i>Hub</i></p>  <p>Black Circle = Large Group</p>	<p><i>Hub and Spokes</i></p>  <p>Black Dots = Small Groups</p>	<p><i>Network</i></p>  <p>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 Meetings	Programmed Ritual and Passive Audience	Large Group: Programmed Small Group: Open	Open: Participatory and Interactive
Purpose of Meetings	One-man show	Large Group: One-Man Show Small Group: Mutual Benefit	Mutual Benefit

Commissioning House Church Missionaries.

Although many in the conventional churches likely will never make the emotional and intellectual paradigm shift to house church networks, they can, however, fully release and support those who have made that leap to go out and start them. In other words, conventional churches that are mission-minded and want to plant churches should give serious consideration to planting fully functioning and self-sustaining house church networks. This may scare some churches and pastors who don't want to let go of capable people. However, rather than viewing this as a loss, it makes a world of difference if it is seen as a viable missionary endeavor to grow the kingdom. A local congregation may, in fact, choose to adopt house church planters and financially support them the same way they already buttress more traditional missionaries and para-church workers.

Transitioning to a House Church Network. There are some conventional congregations that will be able to make the transition as an entire community towards selling the building and reorganizing as a house church network. This will free up their resources and time to help the poor, support missions work overseas, help mobile house church planters, and develop local leadership. There are some that have made such a jump.

But, it is unlikely that very traditional churches will make such a shift all at once, if at all. It may require some intermediate steps.

For congregations that really don't have any experience with small groups, this may involve simply beginning to develop a strong small groups ministry over a number of years that primarily involves people already in that church. For those with a mature small groups ministry, this may involve taking the next step of shifting these small groups towards being evangelistic cell groups, which often can begin to look more and more like house churches. For those local congregations that are cell-based churches with an equal emphasis on home cell groups and Sunday morning celebrations, the final step may be to drop the building and programs and reorganize as a tight network of house churches.

This shift along the spectrum can be described as occurring from "church *with* small groups" to "church *of* small groups" to the more biblical and strategic principle that "church *is* small groups". Each of these steps can move the local Body of Christ into a more functional unity as a citywide church as practiced in the first three centuries.

4

The Role of Denominations and Missions Groups

Although I believe denominations are in no way God's best for the Body of Christ — rather, the citywide or regional church was the apostolic New Testament pattern — we need to work with what we have at the present time in order to usher in long-term changes. So, the entire people of God need to get behind house churches in one way or another for a movement to really explode in Western nations as they are in most other parts of the world. As mentioned in Chapter 4, there are currently some denominations and missions groups that are supporting house church planting efforts, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, Dove Christian Fellowship International, The Free Methodist Church in Canada, The Foursquare Gospel Church of Canada, and the Navigators of Canada. These organizations are having a role to play in initiating and undergirding house church movements.

Realize. Denominations and missions groups need to understand that New Testament-style house churches have a different DNA from small groups, cell groups, or para-church ministries. They are not appendages of conventional congregations. Rather, they are fully functioning churches in and of themselves that network with others of like mind in their city or region. They do not require nor desire church buildings, expensive programs, professional clergy, or highly choreographed services. Gatherings are open, interactive, and family-type meetings around the Lord's Supper as a full meal. They focus on relationships, discipleship, and neighbourhood outreach....

Release. Organizations that wish to endorse house church efforts from within their own ranks will be faced with the challenge of fully releasing leaders to function according to the DNA built into house church movements. Because house church networks desire to re-establish ancient apostolic patterns and practices for church life, denominations will need to avoid the temptation of trying to force these leaders into long-established traditional roles and categories. Because they are typically at the grassroots, most house church leaders functioning on local and trans-local levels will be so-called lay people. They will need to be given the same freedom as more traditional leaders to function in their calling from God to lead, train, and oversee the next generation of house church leaders.

Reinforce. Established Christian organizations, as already mentioned, are supporting house church efforts by funneling money to aid church planters to get new works off the ground and by offering these leaders resources in the way of seminary-equivalent courses, church planting workshops, training materials, regional leadership networks, etc. This kind of support may


accelerate the emergence of house church networks, which might lay dormant in isolated and scattered groups.

Recognize. Denominations and mission agencies also bring recognition and validity to house churches in the eyes of the broader Christian community. This legitimacy, in turn, can open the door for increased openness to future participation by individuals and other denominations not currently involved. Moreover, particularly in North America, the only choice most Christians have is that of the traditional local church. Denominations and missions groups can provide the additional option of house churches to members that have never been completely at home in more traditional settings.

Reform. There may even come a day when some smaller denominations will be prepared to sell all their property and entirely reorganize as regional networks of house churches. They can choose to undergo their own mini-reformation back to apostolic practices. The fact that even a single denomination or mission group would be brave enough to do this would be a serious clarion call to others toward a significant reformation in church structure, something many Christian leaders have been seeking and talking about for years. This would mimic what is already going on in other parts of the world with the house church movement. 🌐

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²³¹ Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest*, Gospel Light/Regal Books: Ventura, CA, 1990, p.

11 (quote used by permission).

²³² David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, p. 34.

²³³ James Rutz with Victor Choudhrie, "House Church Explosion in India", *House-2-House Magazine*, Issue 2, 2002, www.house2house.tv

²³⁴ Wolfgang Simson, p. 107.

²³⁵ David Garrison, p. 35.

²³⁶ Wolfgang Simson, p. 248.

²³⁷ Robert Fitts, *The Church in the House*, 2001, pp. 55-60.

²³⁸ David Garrison, p. 35.