

CANBERRA HOME CHURCHES

This article is a short account of the history and current practice of those home churches in the region of the Australian Capital Territory which are independent of a denomination and which together have created a network or "cluster" of home churches.

While each church in the cluster is completely autonomous, together the churches plan celebrations for mutual enjoyment, or events which support the larger home church movement. And of course they are available to each other for help and advice.

The article was prepared by Ruth Monty, who has been in a home church for 25 years, in discussion with other members of churches in the cluster.

Beginnings

In the mid-1960s two young Australian clergymen were involved in post-graduate study at Cambridge University, half a world away from their parish churches and all the paraphernalia of Australian Anglicanism. Geoffrey Moon and Robert Banks, together with Robert's wife Julia, began to reflect on what they had left behind.

The perspective of distance underlined a growing conviction that ordinary people had been disempowered and then alienated by a hierarchical, paternalistic church structure. They talked and wrote and argued together and with other people. They explored patterns of church life and activity from New Testament times onwards, and wondered at the political structures and massive property holdings which absorbed so much of the contemporary church's energy.

The articles and papers they found themselves writing pointed to ever simpler forms, and to an increasingly egalitarian pattern of relationship and responsibility within the church fellowship. Numbers — often an obsession for denominations with large local and central overheads — were not so important for the new vision as the quality of fellowship and the linking of "church" with everyday life.

They returned to Australia convinced of the need to put what they saw as time-honoured theology and principle into practice. It was a courageous step, given the storm of controversy they left behind them in the Anglican church and the tenuous nature of their future. In 1968 the first Canberra home church had its tentative beginnings in Geoffrey Moon's rented home. A trickle of people heard of the experiment and began to inquire. Some joined in, and were captured immediately by the easy, relaxed format and the possibility of having a part to play. Others were alarmed and did not return. The Banks family too had made their way to Canberra by now. Soon the first home church, outgrowing its suburban living room, was divided in two, and then a third emerged.

At first, people looked to the founders for guidance and leadership. But as the new values began to be understood and appreciated, the initiators were able to step back and become ordinary members themselves. In time Geoffrey Moon moved on to Adelaide and the Banks became involved in a growing home church movement beyond Canberra. Robert and Julia have travelled and spoken with people interested in their ideas and experience throughout Australia, Europe and the USA. In books like *The Home Church*, *All The Business of Life* and *Paul's Idea of Community*, they have narrated, explored and developed the experience of home church and its relationship to everyday life. They continue what began in Cambridge 30 years ago from their current home in Los Angeles.

(From an article, "Bringing the Church Back Home", written by Richard Begbie for *The Canberra Times*; published 3 October 1992.)

There are currently 10 home churches participating in the Canberra cluster of home churches which are discussed in this article. How do these groups operate as independent churches? What distinguishes them from some other Christian small group meetings? Let's look in on one and then go on to discover what long-term home churching has come to mean for the members.

A Typical Home Church Meeting

GREETINGS

On arrival we all take time to greet one another warmly — usually hugs and kisses all round — an indication of the genuine mutual affection that has developed through many shared experiences. Visitors who may have come to see how a home church operates, or perhaps a visiting friend or relative, are introduced and warmly welcomed.

Usually if someone is wanting to join a home church, they are first invited to spend time with some of the members, perhaps over dinner, to clarify understandings and expectations before attending a meeting.

SHARING, PRAYING and SINGING

Our greetings flow naturally into sharing with one another the events of the week. This time seems to be particularly appreciated by the children. They often bring along things to show that have been meaningful to them, and they enjoy the animated interest the adults show in the details of their lives. At the same time they get significant glimpses into the adult world as the adults also share their joys and concerns as appropriate with them.

While we are gathered with the children someone (as agreed previously) presents an activity, discussion, or story in which adults and children can all participate together. Incorporating children as an integral part of the home churches marks them apart from many small group experiences.

Songs and prayers are often interspersed with the sharing and presentation. Everyone is free at any time to suggest a hymn or song (or nursery rhyme!) —usually as an expression of praise, or for the sheer enjoyment of singing, or as an appropriate expression of what people are feeling or experiencing at the time. Each group develops its own repertoire and chooses its music books (or compiles its own), with its own unique blend of accompaniment depending on the abilities of members — but usually with plenty of percussion from the children!

At this point the children, with one or more adults, might move on to an outing. According to the children this is a very significant time for them, when they are made to feel special and when lasting bonds are established between them and the adults.

Sometimes, however, the whole group will stay together joining in an activity where everyone can participate. It may be drawing, drama, modelling with clay or playdough, playing games, or even cooking. Listening to personal stories of faith from other group members, sharing favourite music, poetry or writings, watching a film or going on a picnic or bushwalk are some other beneficial activities. We are always looking for opportunities to celebrate -- marking a personal success, a birthday, a group event or a rite of passage (eg beginning high school) -- which occupy part of the meeting. Other celebrations like sharing a Passover Meal would be for the whole meeting.

LEARNING TOGETHER

When the children are engaged on a separate activity, the adults take time to share and pray at a deeper level and/or to embark on some mutually agreed study —a book (of the Bible or otherwise), or an issue arising from either world affairs or personal concerns. Though someone may have agreed to prepare to talk on a topic everyone is encouraged to participate in discussion and questioning and to contribute from their own experience and reading. This part of the meeting also includes prayer or a prepared meditation or a time of quiet and reflection.

We are seeking constantly to bring Christian principles to bear on our personal concerns, those of our community and the world at large. As Robert and Julia Banks have said of people in such groups: "Because it is vital to them to learn

something that is relevant to their inner concerns and daily responsibilities, they are not satisfied with the airing of ignorances or prejudices. Generally they come to home churches because they are hungry for fellowship and knowledge. They will not be satisfied with a superficial understanding any more than with superficial relationships. They want to discover what authentic Christianity is all about and are willing to leave behind their ignorances and re-examine their prejudices in order to do this." (Robert and Julia Banks, *The Home Church*, Albatross Books: Sydney 1986, p244.)

We are often amazed, despite the smallness of the group, at how broad a spectrum of Christianity is embodied, understood, and drawn upon in the group.

THE MEAL

When the children return it is time to eat together. Every home church meeting is centred on a meal (see e.g. Acts 20:7 "we gathered together to break bread"; 1 Cor. 11:33 "when you gather together to eat ..."), another point of departure from some other small groups. It may be the mid-day meal or it could be breakfast or the evening meal. It may commence the meeting, mark its close or occur in the middle, but always it is regarded as of central importance.

Usually each week one group member or family is designated to be responsible for introducing the meal. This may be done by choosing an appropriate scripture reading and prayer, or some other reading or song or activity to emphasise a particular significance of the Lord's Supper. Occasionally bread and wine are used in the more traditional sense, but usually this is found to be no more meaningful than using the everyday elements to hand, as indeed Jesus did.

In fact, in experiencing this communal meal weekly over a long time, one can see it as a constant picture of what home church life is all about — each brings a contribution (at some cost of effort, time and money) that is appreciated by all. The combination of these diverse contributions usually results in a banquet which we all delight in. In this way we more and more enter into an understanding of what it means to be part of the Body of Christ!

The time taken for such a meeting is usually three to four hours.

[It should be mentioned here that there are currently two groups in this network -- one which meets monthly and the other which meets of an evening without children or a meal -- which vary from the typical home church so far described. This underlines the need for flexibility to meet the needs of those who can't manage the model the majority enjoy.]

AUTONOMY, LEADERSHIP and PLANNING

All decisions to do with the week-to-week running of a particular group are always made by all its members. This means that decision making is centred upon the real needs and life situations of each member. Important lessons of give and take are learned (sometimes painfully) as we decide together when and where to meet, what to study, children's activities, and other aspects of the group's life. It becomes apparent at this point that this church's approach to LEADERSHIP differs from that of many other churches. Leadership becomes a shared experience according to the gifts of each member. While at one point of the meeting, someone may be "leading" through a teaching s/he may be giving, at another point a co-ordinator will take over, perhaps followed by someone conducting a children's activity.

For some groups a roster is an important focus. One meeting may be set aside to plan activities for some months ahead, after which a roster will be drawn up with members allocated to various responsibilities — eg children's activity (with the whole group), taking the children out of the meeting for an hour or so, introducing the meal, taking responsibility for music and prayer etc. There is a great deal of variation in such structuring from group to group. However, remaining flexible, allowing for the unexpected and the spontaneous contribution is of vital importance.

Our experience has been that those who truly "lead" a group are some who might never see themselves in this role. They are those who, from their inner motivations, make caring visits and phone calls during the week and arrange to see that needs are met, or those who encourage others out of the strength of their own faith, or who evoke hope through their vision of what can be. It is these "behind the scenes" activities that carry a group forward.

As a church grows important decisions need to be made about its SIZE. Experience is teaching us that once numbers exceed 20 people, including children, the quality of time together begins to diminish. In this event, processes begin towards forming another group -- sometimes by dividing the group equally in two; sometimes by sending off a smaller component (four to five people) to launch another group, perhaps with newcomers, or perhaps with a small number from another existing group. Yes, this process is often painful and difficult, full of risk and not always successful.

Division into two groups has often found one of the two struggling to the point of disbanding. Parting with a smaller number has proved more successful, though it still means saying goodbye to those you've been meeting regularly with for many years. Sometimes people have felt pressured to make moves they didn't feel quite comfortable with, so now we tend to take more time considering options and waiting for consensus. Despite the problems, the process always brings commensurate rewards and benefits.

Over time a network, or CLUSTER, of home churches has been established in Canberra. To link them, a special mid-week pastoral meeting is held on a six-weekly basis. It is open to any members of all groups who are concerned for the welfare of the whole church, who want to discuss and pray through any issues of pastoral concern that may arise, and who want to be part of the planning of corporate activities. Such activities include Easter and Christmas gatherings, social occasions, and "enrichment weekends" where all those interested can gather to discuss in greater depth a topic of current importance. Much joy, encouragement and support flow from these gatherings. Some of the women who are available to meet during the day-time have developed a monthly (sometimes fortnightly) meeting, which has proved most enjoyable and beneficial, and contributes to the strengthening of bonds among the groups. The Canberra home churches have also been host to two very successful national gatherings. A third, hosted by home churches in New South Wales, will be held in Sydney in October 1997.

These then are the things that can be observed by participation in a particular meeting — ie the intimacy of the home; smallness of size; centrality of the meal; corporate leadership and mutual participation; and the commitment of time spent together. These are the features which we find bring us a more meaningful experience of what is described as church in the New Testament. But what is it that is experienced by members over a longer period of time? What have we been learning over the years that contributes to our growth in maturity?

Authenticity — Being Grounded in Everyday Life

The familiarity, informality and intimacy of a home setting together with the focus on a meal, grounds us in the realities of everyday life (babies, animals, telephones, doorbells etc). It reminds us of how much time Jesus spent in people's homes and sharing meals, and that this is precisely the setting in which the Spirit would produce kingdom qualities. In such a setting we are best encouraged to be natural and real with one another, to let down our masks and allow others to become part of our daily routines, tensions, hang-ups, or moods -- to see us "warts and all".

Such an experience of the constancy of the love of our fellow Christians is valuable beyond words. As we take turns to host the meetings, we learn to accept, adapt ourselves to, and appreciate each family's unique style of living. If we are truly to "accept one another" as we are enjoined, then its greatest expression would be seen in the home, where we express who we really are in all our strengths and weaknesses. One member comments: "I go to home church as me, and talk about the things that are important to me. What happens depends on each person who's there. It's empowering because it's saying we all matter, what we all think matters. I can bring what's happening in the rest of my life to church, and what's an issue for me today is going to matter to the group."

Another shares this experience: "When I first joined a home church I came with a lot of baggage that I'd picked up along the way in my Christian life. Much of this baggage was not helpful. Looking back I see that I'd separated the spiritual from the rest of life. I had an image in my mind of what a Christian person should be like. With this image went all sorts of expectations of how other Christians should behave and therefore how I should behave.

"The problem was that no one and especially not me seemed to be doing what I had expected. I had all sorts of thoughts and feelings that didn't fit the Christian image I had in mind. I felt stifled and bound. Fear and anxiety levels were high. I was afraid that if I let on to my true self I would not be acceptable. If I told people my feelings and thoughts I would

be shunned. As a result I think I stayed in the one spot in my growth for quite a while, not being able to move because of fear.

"Then some amazing things happened. My personal life became extremely difficult. So difficult that I was unable to hide any longer if I wanted to stay in church. The choice seemed to be to leave home church or to let on about some of what was happening in my family. By making the choice to stay, a whole new experience opened up for me. Imagine my surprise when instead of being shunned or condemned I was met with love and acceptance.

"For example, one Sunday I arrived at church with my family. I was exhausted from lack of sleep because my new baby was keeping me awake, crying night after night. The hostess was able to see immediately the state I was in. The baby was taken from me to be cared for by the others and I was put to bed for a much needed rest. For me that was church. My other children were taken care of and I felt loved and greatly warmed by such under-standing.

"So growth started through God's love displayed by other members of the church. Such acceptance freed me to grow. I discovered it was OK to let people know what I was thinking and feeling. It was OK to be happy and rejoice or to be sad and cry. What the Bible talks about refers to real people in real situations — no matter how difficult these situations might be. All of this opened the way for me to become a really authentic person!"

Acceptance — Dealing With Difference

Our ability to accept one another is constantly challenged at many points. We see the university graduate sharing with the intellectually disabled; the woman who has chosen to energetically pursue a career regarding equally the one who chooses home centred interests; the pacifist learning to understand and appreciate another member who advocates defence build-up; the older single person taking part in the marriage celebrations of the young; couples who can't have children struggling to come to terms with their own feelings as they enter into the welcome celebration of another couple's baby. Such things are the stuff of life and integral to church life. They are never glossed over or taken for granted.

It is not long either before one discovers that not many of the home church members relate to God in just the same way as I do. In this informal setting, with no set liturgy and any pretences starting to fall away, it can be most discomfiting when these differences become apparent, and for a while we fight a strong urge to bring about conformity. Yet as one member aptly notes: "In home church your history matters. Your story is important. If I'm in your group and am going to say something which offends 10 or 15 years of your experience — it won't work".

So we are learning to take delight in all the various ways people find God working in their lives. We are learning the joys and wisdom to be derived from unlike-minded people genuinely loving, respecting and encouraging one another in their differences until God brings about an undreamt-of unity in the Spirit. Jean Vanier, whose work in establishing communities for the intellectually disabled has given him valuable insights in this area, argues that "to accept our weaknesses and those of others is the very opposite of sloppy complacency ... It is essentially a concern for truth so that we do not live in illusion but can grow from where we are and not where we want to be or where others want us to be." (Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, St. Paul Publications, Homebush, NSW, 1989, p37.)

Elsewhere he says: "The tendency to deny differences is the basis of most sects, in contrast to the basis of community. The goal of community is the freedom and growth of each person ... When for ideological reasons we cannot accept people who are different, but scorn them or wish they were not present, this is intolerable, because we are forcing people to be other than they are. Only when differences are accepted, not as a threat but as a treasure, is each one free to be him or herself." (Quarterly magazine, *Letters of L'Arche*, nd.)

Mutual Ministry — Valuing One Another

Practising such love, acceptance, appreciation and commitment, eventually means finding ourselves close to people in crises and with problems we might never have imagined ourselves being closely involved with. Such difficult life circumstances could include: death, accident, illness, divorce, single parenting, financial difficulties, work crises, personal conflicts etc. Faced with these things in a small group, we so often feel overwhelmed, inadequate, frightened, anxious, overburdened, or even judgmental. It is at this point that we begin to feel the force of the principle of mutual

ministry. So often those of us overtaken by a crisis or serious problem suddenly feel second rate, and others look at us only in terms of the problem and that we need ministering to. But home churching has been teaching us that we're all in the business of life together, and what is your problem today may be mine tomorrow.

We are learning that in spite of current difficulties we are still valued and even have our own contribution to make. Our own particular combination of circumstances, experiences, choices and capabilities (or lack of them), makes each one of us unique, with our own perspective on life, and our own relationship with God through what we have lived so far. We first need to perceive this very special gift to the church: our own uniqueness. Then, from this starting point, other significant gifts and ministries begin to emerge. We come to trust more of what wells up from within us, born of what we've suffered through, rejoiced over, enjoyed doing or had to do.

As the Spirit touches this source within us we may well find ourselves praying prophetically, or uttering statements of faith, wisdom, knowledge, discernment, encouragement; or teaching (maybe discovering our own parables) from what God is showing us through our experience. Again from the starting point of appreciation, acceptance and care of one another, it is only natural to see emerge such gifts as mercy, service, intercession, miracles, or pastoring. So we are learning to trust the processes God has initiated in the dynamics of churching in a small group.

There is a special efficacy in being really present to one another for a considerable length of time on a regular weekly basis. In so doing we are virtually saying to one another: "I value you as a person and I freely choose to spend this time in your company — you are a very high priority in my life and you matter to me." This kind of meeting provides a valuable reference point which over time can give us stability and allow us to integrate the various aspects of our lives. It helps prevent us from allowing our ups and downs to discourage us or lessen our confidence in God.

Particularly we are learning what it means in 1 Cor 12:26 that: "If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it" — not just in sympathy, but in the actual and often costly adaptation of all our lives to that suffering — be it extra time given in caring and ministry, prayer, financial support, being aware of special dietary, physical or other needs.

On the other hand we also learn: "If one part is praised, all the other parts share its happiness" — the same quality of pride and delight as in a family. It is often only after looking back over several years that we can see what enormous changes for good God has wrought in us all. In this way we try to avoid primarily focussing on solving one another's problems. Rather we accompany, support, pray, care and use our gifts as appropriate, always aiming to treat one another as respected normal people.

Outworking

It may seem that such a church is just a small group of people looking after themselves. Even if this were so they would still be learning a great deal in a very practical way about living the Gospel. In fact, however, we are realising that, as a small group of people lives in this way, the outworkings into the community at large are quite considerable. This is evident on two levels.

Firstly we see that the major thrust of the Gospel is to acknowledge, value and care about those people who are marginalised in our society. It is these very people who are incorporated in the home church where all are valued and have a contribution to make.

Secondly, all that we learn from these interactions inevitably flows over into all our other activities, and also because all our activities so naturally have a place in our church life. So it is that, for example, the music teacher from our group develops a reputation as one who cares for her pupils as individuals and devises programs accordingly; the university lecturer is well known for his ability to relate well and caringly to his students; the school principal has built up a school which is well known for its atmosphere of care and acceptance.

Many of us, as staff or committee members, find we are appreciated both for the various skills in relationships we have developed in our home church and also for the insights we can contribute as Christians which have developed out of the discussion and prayer we engage in on a weekly basis in church. Even though we may not as a group become involved in a particular community project, many of the individual members certainly do. Some are actively involved in

organisations which provide care for: children in crisis; people with intellectual/ psychiatric disability; the aged; those who have suffered abuse; aborigines; overseas aid etc. Those so involved are most appreciative of the support, encouragement and input they so regularly receive from their home church.

There are other members who find that what they have gained from home churching has added another dimension to the quality and efficacy of friendship outside church, and to other groups to which they belong. For these reasons we have come to recognise home churches as, to use Robert and Julia Banks' term, "agents of transformation " (see *The Home Church*, chapter 10).

Some members of churches in the cluster have recently established a "Search for Meaning Group" — an experimental attempt to get together with non-church attending friends who expressed interest in the spiritual dimension of life. They gather in one another's homes and discuss their spiritual concerns — so widening the circle of those who can experience something of what we so appreciate in home church. Originally this group was to meet for six weeks, but most members agreed enthusiastically to continue meeting fortnightly, and new members have since joined.

Conclusion

It seems that the factors operating in home churches meet the basic human needs and hopes of all mankind and for these reasons we carry the hope and vision that they may be "agents of transformation" in a much larger sphere. We are encouraged by the fact that similar groups operate throughout the world in many different societies and cultures — it is exciting to see we have so much in common with, and also so much to learn from, the flourishing grass roots church communities of China and South America.

From his wealth of experience of living in Christian community Art Gish has found that "our primary work in social change goes beyond changing the hearts of individuals or transforming power structures, for it comes from the understanding that the main social structure through which God's redeeming work is effected in the world is the Christian community ... Our best efforts at "saving the world" are directed toward building up the body of Christ, the first-fruits of the new order. "The creation of Christian community is the most radical political action one can ever experience, especially if it involves breaking down social barriers, proclaiming liberty to the captives and establishing justice. It is the coming to concrete reality of a new life that will not only show what is wrong with the old, but point so clearly to the new which is possible that the old can no longer command our loyalty and devotion ... "Our responsibility to the world is always first to be the church; to embody what God wants to say to the whole world, to live and demonstrate what salvation means." (Art Gish, *Living in a Christian Community*, Albatross Books, Sydney, 1979, p293.) In summary then, we are gathering together in our home church, not as individuals coming together to worship and to be taught — but rather, through conscientiously giving priority to people and relationships, and only developing structures to best meet that end, we see ourselves develop increasingly into an expression of the reality of the kingdom of God.

Written by Ruth Monty with much appreciation of help given by: Richard Begbie, Helen Small, Jenny Trefry-Bath, David Hunter, Lyndal Wilson, Elizabeth Yuile and Clive Monty; Canberra, 1996.

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