

## **CHURCH AT HOME: Early church model gaining favor**

Church is different at 5 Katy Lane in Austin. At least it's different from what most people today think of as church.

The congregation meets every Sunday. They sing, pray, teach and worship. But they do it all in a house. And not just as a temporary measure. This is where they want to be.

Tony and Felicity Dale started Austin Fellowship of Home Churches five years ago and the congregation that meets in their home has no intention of ever being anything other than a house church. They do, however, have a vision for starting countless other house churches. Eight already are in various stages of development.

The Dales are part of a growing worldwide movement toward house churches. Such gatherings are different from home Bible study groups or cell groups. They are fully-functioning churches of 15 to 30 people, with a commitment to reaching others not by growing a larger church but by helping create more and more house churches.

Wolfgang Simson, author of *Houses That Change The World*, spoke to about 170 people in the Dales' home March 17-18. He told story after story of the millions of people around the world being reached for Christ through house churches.

House churches are a "global phenomena," and they spread like a virus, he said.

Simson, who lives in Germany, said traditional and cell-based churches have their place. He sees house churches, however, as reflecting the biblical model and being the best means for rapid worldwide evangelism and discipleship. The church must get small to get large, he said. "House church is the most effective way for making disciples."

Simson used an animal metaphor to illustrate the evangelistic impact of house churches. "If you put two elephants in a room and two rabbits in a room, in three years you will have three elephants and 476 million rabbits," he said.

Wonderful things happen in "elephant type" churches, but "with all of these elephant churches around" it's "time for a rabbit plague," he said. He compares house churches to rapidly multiplying rabbits.

House churches began to experience a rebirth in 1949 when Mao Tse Tung forced western missionaries to leave China, Simson said. The West could not imagine how the church in China would survive; but 30 years later, the number of

Christians in China had grown from 3 million to 60 million. They meet in house churches.

Church is a “very simple thing” that has been made more complex by western cultural aspects that have nothing to do with the gospel, Simson said.

House churches are the New Testament model, and they are a natural fit with how God has revealed himself in Scripture, he asserted. “The type of church we have on earth depends on the type of God we have in heaven. If God would be a father in heaven, the church would be like a family on earth.”

Being part of a family is a “24/7 thing,” he said, meaning that it affects a person’s life 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But families have their most intimate gatherings in houses.

”So many of the things going on in this country are very sophisticated,” the German speaker said. “One of the messages of God for this nation” is that the simple and weak things are “going to change this land.”

Sunday morning activities at 5 Katy Lane begin with a potluck breakfast at 10:30. Church members eat and share informally in small groups that fluctuate as the people move around. “The food is as important as everything else,” said Tony Dale.

After a leisurely breakfast, the congregation moves toward a prayer and worship time. Adults and children mingle together in small groups to pray.

Music comes next. There is not a structured order of worship, and no one knows exactly what will happen. A couple of praise songs are sung to get things started, and the service moves forward as a free, interactive experience among the worshippers. Children occupy themselves around the fringes of the group.

After a time, the children are taken to another area, and a speaker delves into a passage of Scripture. About 1:30 p.m., the gathering breaks up, but the churchgoers don’t rush off. Some eat lunch from the leftover breakfast. Others clean and straighten. Everyone talks.

Lori Byerly has been a part of the 5 Katy Lane congregation for more than a year. Asked why she worshipped there, Byerly said, “Probably for a long time I was sort of dissatisfied with staring at the back of somebody’s head.” She wanted a closer fellowship.

”It’s been an incredibly healthy move for our family,” she testified.

Her 10-year-old son is “all wiggle and always has been,” she said. “The traditional churches have been hard on him. Now, he loves church. If he gets

wiggly, it's more a family atmosphere. It's the first church where he has felt really accepted."

It's been good for her and her husband, Paul, as well. "It's like we have real friends in this church, ... a real personal knowledge of each other and a real willingness to do the practical."

The church at 5 Katy Lane has reached out in varied ministries, and about 80 percent of funds collected by the church "go out to bless others," Felicity Dale said. A housing project in south Austin has felt the congregation's loving touch; and The Magdalene Project, launched by member Robbi Sluder, ministers to women involved in prostitution, exotic dancing and the street life.

"This is such a small body of believers, and they do so much," Byerly said.

Another member at 5 Katy Lane, Michael Reed, said in a house church "it's all together up to you to lay hold of God; ... and that's more out on a limb. I don't like being out on a limb, but I sure like watching him come through."

The church is not affiliated with a denomination and does not have a pastor. Tony Dale functions as an elder, providing light-handed leadership throughout--guiding and directing the activities but not controlling them.

When the family of God does come together, it should do four things, Simson said.

First, they should eat together, he said, noting this was a "very important aspect of the ministry of Jesus."

Almost every day he was in someone's house and eating, Simson said. "This is where it starts. Eating is a sign of your family."

When the church eats together, however, it is not just about food. Christians "need the power of the Holy Spirit for it. ... The Lord's Supper is a family meal with God."

Second, Simson said, church is not about organized meetings. It is to share God and life with others and "to share life needs time." That means to share in whatever way needed--spiritually, financially or whatever.

Third, church involves teaching the word of God, which mainly refers to teaching through example, Simson said. "It doesn't have to do with long monologue; it has to do with dialogue."

Fourth, church includes praying and prophesying. "Prayer was the lifestyle of the early church," he said. Prophesying refers to how God speaks through individuals to the church.

As for what's happening at 5 Katy Lane, Felicity Dale admits it's a lot of work, but she loves it. "Once you've tasted something like this morning, when God touches you at a deep level, how can you be satisfied with anything else?" she said. "You don't know what the Holy Spirit is going to show up and do."

Ferrell Foster is a news writer for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Reprinted with permission from The Baptist Standard March 26, 2001 Edition Texas Baptist Communications

House2house.tv