

# Home-grown churches

## *Why some Christians never leave home to go to church*

By Craig Bird

"Let's get together at My house this Sunday before the game." - God

Remember that billboard? Good advice. Bad directions. After all, who knows where God's house is?

But for most people, there was no need for directions. "God's house" equates to a church, which usually means a building with a steeple, parking lot, denominational identity, preacher and order of service.

Not for a growing segment of believers who "go" to church by staying home. They shove the couch back, bring the kitchen chairs into the den, and answer the doorbell. Or perhaps they travel to a friend's house where the furniture has been similarly rearranged so a small group of people can gather to worship.

Generally known as house churches, they intentionally change the emphasis -- and the grammar -- of church. These Christians don't *go* to church, they *do* church as they *go*.

"Members of the body of Christ do not go to a place to be the church, but rather they *are* the church wherever they go," explains Bruce Wofford of Ontario, a former missionary who now is part of the House Church Network.

House churches go by other names as well -- simple church, discovery group, believer's church, body life, open church, New Testament church, home fellowships, organic Christianity, small groups. But don't call them cell groups! That's a vestige of the much-despised megachurch.

### **Slippery subject**

The house-church movement is nothing new -- in fact the practice is ancient -- but it has produced a flurry of activity in recent years.

How many people are involved in house churches? The answer is literally, "God only knows." They prefer fellowship to filling out forms. Inherently resistant to outside authority, house churchers limit their size to maintain intimacy. They look upon the traditional church with at least skepticism and often disgust. But they hold a special disdain for the marketing strategies of the church-growth movement.

"It is impossible to (thoroughly) research house churches, not 'real' ones anyway," advises Herb Drake of House Church Central. "They tend to be, at least partially, underground. They don't apply to the IRS for tax-exempt status. They don't advertise in

newspapers or send out mass mailings. They simply build relationships with people and attract them to Christ."

Though largely low-tech, house churches have discovered the Internet. A Google search for "house church" returns more than 3 million hits. Those websites that include directories yield addresses for approximately 2,000 house churches in the United States. Overseas numbers are even more slippery -- but even more impressive. An estimated 80 million Chinese Christians are involved in house churches.

The popularity of house churches, at least in the United States, stems from their decentralized structure, the emphasis on in-depth relationships, the priority of spiritual experience over rational argument, and an appeal to "authentic first-century Christian worship."

For "post-congregationals," who for various reasons shun traditional churches (*FaithWorks*, Sept.-Oct. 2002), house churches are often a refreshing alternative.

"These are, for the most part, people who want to strip faith down to its bare minimum," Nancy Ammerman of Hartford Seminary, one of America's leading sociologists of religion, told *The New York Times*. "They don't want to have to support a big building and staff and insurance policies and advertising campaigns and fixing the roof, because all of that seems to them to be extraneous to what they understand a life of faith to be."

### **'Pure chaos'**

That appeal certainly hooked college student Ruthy Lipka, but only after first repelling her. "As a teenager I rebelled against my Pentecostal-preacher's-daughter upbringing and became obsessed with studying different doctrines and denominations," she told *FaithWorks*. "I eventually decided the Presbyterians had just the right doctrine so I had to go there. I loved sitting in a pew. I loved singing hymns so that I could sound good. I loved that big old organ up there. Life was pretty perfect as far as churches were concerned."

Then a college friend invited her to a Brandon, Fla., home fellowship. "I wore a dress but everyone else was in everyday clothes," she recalled. "Some people actually wore -- dare I say it? -- shorts! I didn't quite like that. ... People didn't ring the doorbell. They just barged in. And they weren't quiet and proper when they did. They didn't ask 'How do you do?' but called out 'Praise the Lord!' ...

"I sat in a kitchen! Some people actually sat on the floor. ... There was no preacher. That shocked me. One guy stood up after some songs and I thought he was the preacher. Then someone else stood up. Then someone else. Then a girl sang a song. Then some older man read a [Scripture] passage that had ministered to him that week. Then a little 9-year-old girl shared what she had seen in devotions with her mom that week. It was pure chaos! ...

"Not only was there no organ, but the one guy who had a guitar didn't even play for most of the songs. And they didn't have it planned either. They'd just finish a song and someone would shout out, 'Let's sing 'As the Deer.' And they'd all bust out singing as if they'd practiced all morning."

That initial encounter unsettled her. "This isn't church," she told friends later. "It was just a bunch of people coming together and sharing the Lord." Almost four years later, she concedes, "Little did I know then that this is exactly what the church is. The church is not an organization. It is an organism. It is a living, breathing woman, the Bride of Christ. Christ is the absolute dead center of our meetings -- not organ playing, not the preacher, not a sermon, not Sunday school and not even any doctrine. We share how we saw Christ during the week, each and every one of us."

### **House-church DNA**

Lipka's description touches on the three primary threads of house-church DNA -- limited size (typically no more than 20 people), non-professional leadership, and no buildings.

House churchers also proclaim a common commitment, at least among the evangelicals who make up the overwhelming number of such groups, to replicate the first-century model of "meeting house to house."

Otherwise, variety is the order of the day.

"We are from almost every Christian background -- Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, Church of Christ -- [and] many others have never been associated with any sect," writes Dan Beaty in "The Church: Triumphant in Christ! "We agree on very little doctrine. Some believe baptism is necessary for salvation, some don't. Some believe smoking is okay, some don't. Some believe that drinking alcohol is okay, some don't. None believes that doing something that harms his neighbor is okay."

"For many Christians, the house church is simply an extension of the home-schooling principle," writes Mark Mattison of Open House Church. "Their driving motivation is withdrawal from the world. For others, the house church is a key to renewal and mission in the existing church. For yet others, the house church is part of apostolic tradition and should be considered normative on that basis. And for yet others, it is merely a rap session, an outlet to express frustration over the institutional church. ... That's part of the diverse house-church dynamic!"

Other similarities and differences include:

-- The overwhelming majority of house-church members define themselves as evangelical Christians. But a handful are accused of espousing a New Age theology. Many more consider even Southern Baptists to be rank liberals. Others teeter on the brink of cultism.

-- Most house churches declare unswerving commitment to a biblically based theology. But interpretation can vary widely. For example, some house churches require female members to remain silent, while others argue that women are equal ministers. A few house churches are steadfastly "King James only." One website ([www.balaams-ass.com](http://www.balaams-ass.com)) offers extensive materials for those who wish to start house churches, but only those committed to the KJV. "Our creed is the King James Bible with no outside presuppositions tolerated. If you live in a non-English speaking nation, and if you can prove your Bible is based 100 percent on the Textus Receptus, we will work with that. Better yet, learn English so you can study the KJV. :)"

-- Most house churches carefully distance themselves from traditional congregations. But the degree of separation runs from those who condemn traditional churches as pawns of Satan to those who send their children on mission trips with church youth groups. Some even remain involved in traditional churches while embracing the house-church fellowship.

Angry diatribes, personal attacks and even threats of lawsuits are far too common in the house-church movement, where conviction runs deep and pain from past church battles is chronic. Most of the conflict centers on what critics say is the central failing of house churches: Who gives leadership and enforces doctrinal discipline? After fleeing the traditional church, with its propensity toward spirit-killing authoritarianism, how do you avoid corrupting freedom with heresy?

### **Means or end?**

Is the house church an effective way to spread the gospel? Or is the movement best seen as an end in itself?

Without the need to train and pay professional clergy or build and maintain buildings, house churches can free incredible financial resources to do missions and take care of the needy, proponents say.

Seminary professor Alan Karr is a convert to the house-church-as-outreach viewpoint. While teaching a class on church planting, he discovered among his students an overwhelming interest in house churches. He took the hint.

"I've been a pastor of traditional churches for more than 20 years, but now I'm a pastor in my own home on Saturday nights," said Karr, who teaches at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary.

Typically 30-to-35 people meet in Karr's living room. One member gives free guitar lessons prior to the meeting. Baptisms may take place in a backyard hot tub or a church borrowed for that purpose.

Already the group has spawned one new house church and three others will spin out soon. That pattern of growth could continue indefinitely, says Karr, who also participates in more traditional church plants.

"To keep things simple we are going to organize and register as a single church -- the Ethene Church Network -- but each house group will function as totally independent. All cooperation will be voluntary."

House-church networks are particularly popular as a church-planting strategy among Gen-X Christians. The groups in the network usually come together to celebrate worship and fellowship once a week or once a month.

Rick Bennett, a Baptist church planter among 20-somethings in Boston, uses a house-church strategy out of necessity. The cost of meeting space in Boston is prohibitive, he says.

In Austin, Texas, house churches have a British accent. Brits Tony and Felicity Dale, both medical professionals, became involved in house churches in a poor section of London three decades ago. Now in Central Texas, they helped organize the Austin Fellowship of Home Churches, which has 15 member groups after five years. In 2001 they launched *House2House* magazine, which has a circulation of 30,000.

### **A rabbit plague**

House-church purists, however, despise the church-planting movement -- along with all other strategies that look like marketing of the church. The house church is the end in itself, they say, not a means to an end or a "starter church."

Still there is an emerging trend that bases evangelism squarely on the house-church concept.

The Dawn International Network insists house churches are not only the best way to spread Christianity but, practically speaking, the only way. The umbrella organization's immodest goal is "to have at least one Christian congregation within walking distance of every human on earth." Sniffs one house churcher, "They are to church planting what the Willow Creek Association is to seeker services."

Wolfgang Simson, a German evangelical who is part of Dawn-Europe, makes the case: "If you put two elephants in a room and two rabbits in [another] room, in three years you will have three elephants and 476 million rabbits. Wonderful things happen in elephant-type churches. But with all of these elephant churches around, it's time for a rabbit plague."

In his popular book, *Houses That Change the World*, Simson argues: "It is time to change the system. Luther did reform the content of the gospel, but left the outer forms of church

remarkably untouched. The Free-Church freed the system from the state, the Baptists then baptized it, the Quakers dry-cleaned it, the Salvation Army put it into a uniform, the Pentecostals anointed it and the Charismatics renewed it. But until today nobody has really changed the superstructure. It is about time to do just that. ...

"The church has to become small in order to grow big. The traditional congregational church as we know it is, statistically speaking, neither big nor beautiful, but rather a sad compromise -- an overgrown house-church and an undergrown [worship] celebration, often missing the dynamics of both."

### **Beyond fault-finding**

Dan Beaty of [www.livingtruth.com](http://www.livingtruth.com) is a little more charitable in his assessment.

"Having church in the home, of course, does not automatically fix everything [that is wrong with the traditional church]. We [house churchers] must maintain a healthy, affirming spirit towards all of God's people and his work in other environments. ...

"God is at work in the institutional church. He is saving people, teaching them, building up his body ... all [in a] place we deem to be a less than an ideal setting. Satan would love to keep us home-church folk busy with fault finding. We will never run out of problems to expose in the institutional church -- and even in those who home church but not like us.

"Let us be about our Father's business and leave his purpose for others in the various churches and denominations up to him."

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### **Resources**

Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change the World*, OM Publishing, 1998  
Stephen Atkerson, Editor, *Toward a House Church Theology*, New Testament Restoration Foundation, 1996  
Stanley Nelson, *A Believer's Church Theology*, House Church Central, 1994  
House2House magazine, [www.house2house.tv](http://www.house2house.tv)  
Dawn International Network, [www.dawnministries.org](http://www.dawnministries.org)  
[www.housechurch.org](http://www.housechurch.org)  
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