

Simple Church: The Journey of a House Church Planter

By Joseph Cartwright

My journey towards house church Christianity began early on in life. My parents were church planters who began most of the churches in our home or in the home of another believer. I remember how the Holy Spirit brought about such intimacy and fellowship in those small gatherings. Often, my sister and I would be the only children in the meetings, yet we were assimilated into all aspects. We both came to Jesus at an early age and began to mature rapidly in this 'home church' environment. Eventually, as these churches grew, they would rent facilities and hire a pastor. We would then move to start the process over again. This happened throughout my early years.

In high school we moved back to East Texas so my Dad could pastor a church that they had started many years earlier. It was at this point that I joined a local Southern Baptist Church in town that had a great youth program. In all honesty, I first attended because I began dating a girl who went to church there. Little did I know that God had set me exactly where He desired me to be. In 1987, I officially joined this church and began my journey into Southern Baptist Church life. It was through this church that I gained a passion for missions and evangelism and surrendered to ministry.

I continued on to go to college at East Texas Baptist University. It was the summer of my sophomore year when God revealed to me through a prophetic word, by way of a Southern Baptist missionary from Thailand, that I had an apostolic call on my life. It was at this point that I really began looking intently at the Bride of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. I went on to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to prepare for missionary service.

My wife and I had the privilege of serving in Argentina as two-year church planting personnel with The International Mission Board of Southern Baptists. I was able to complete my seminary studies while we were on the field. It was in Argentina that the Holy Spirit birthed in my spirit the need for house churches. I was very frustrated with church planting in Argentina. The methodology was to build a building, which the people could barely afford, and then fill it up with people. The problem was that this kind of church planting was largely ineffective. An even greater problem was that the churches didn't look or function like the churches I had studied so intently in the New Testament.

I had been given an early disk copy of Wolfgang Simson's book *Houses That Change The World*. I also began looking for house church information on the internet. God then showed me that He was leading me to plant this type of church. I never had the opportunity to plant house churches in Argentina because the local national leaders didn't see them as legitimate. But, God had spoken His heart to me and I was forever changed.

When our two-year term ended we came back to the States and had no direction as to what God desired for us to do. I lacked faith that I would be able to plant house churches here in the States. I had resigned myself to planting another type of church or being on staff at a local church as a minister of missions. Little did I know that God had prepared the way.

The Dallas Baptist Association in Dallas, Texas had voted to plant house churches and to hire a house church planter catalyst to be on the associational staff. I didn't know this at the time I met with Tim Ahlen, the director of the church planting division. I began to pour out my heart to him about my desire to plant churches. At one point in the conversation I let the words 'house church' slip out. Tim asked me to explain my heart in relation to house churches. A divine moment was unfolding before us as we discussed what God had put in my heart. When I finished sharing, Tim went over to his computer and printed off a job description for the house church planter catalyst. When he handed it to me, I thought it was a joke. I expected someone to come out and say, "Smile, your on Candid Camera." It was no joke. I had found the place God had specifically created for me to fill.

I have been with the association for nine months now. We have a fledgling house church network and God is forming the first Ephesians 4:11-12 equipping team. We desire to see God saturate our region with churches that do not meet in church buildings and that are led by 'lay leaders'. Please pray for us to have wisdom as we walk this journey back to simple churches that meet in ordinary homes.

Family

Joseph lives with his wife and children in Dallas, Texas.

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About Us

Our church is part of a growing house church network in the Dallas area. It is a part of the cooperative ministry of the Dallas Baptist Association. This network is in its infant stages, but God is establishing our steps together as we move forward in Him. The information below gives a little of the flavor of what God has called us to as a network of house churches.

The DBA House Church Network Vision

We envision a network of home-grown, 'lay-led' house churches permeating every community in Dallas and Rockwall Counties with the life-changing, community-transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and reproducing itself to the ends of the earth to fulfill the Great Commission.

The DBA House Church Network Mission

We exist to win the lost, disciple the saved, and form Biblical communities of believers in every segment of society, starting in Dallas and Rockwall Counties and reaching to the ends of the earth.

The DBA House Church Network Values

The Bible: Our only authority in matters of doctrine and practice. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

New Testament Church Traditions: Those traditions that were handed down from the Apostles as found in the Scriptures. Mark 7:1-13; 1 Corinthians 11:2; 2 Thessalonians 2:15

1. Plurality of Leaders- This involved having multiple, co-equal leaders (elders) as compared with the single-pastor model. Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17,28; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-4

2. Open, Participative Meetings- Each member of the Body was encouraged to contribute to the meeting for the building up of the Body. Having one preacher, teacher, or worship leader dominate the meeting was not the norm in the New Testament. This doesn't mean that there were not times of directive teaching by those so gifted, but all believers were able to contribute their gifts to the meeting for the edification and building up of the body. The size of these meetings was small. 1 Corinthians 12, 14:26; Ephesians 4:15-16; 1 Peter 4:10-11

2. Lord's Supper as a Meal- The Lord's Supper was a celebration (Acts 2:46) that consisted of a full meal (Acts 2:46; 1 Corinthians 11: 20-26). It was a time of remembrance of what Christ did at the cross to bring salvation and a looking forward to his second coming when they would enjoy the marriage feast of the Lamb. This is different from the typical Lord's Supper celebration of most Western churches.

4. Believer's Baptism- Baptism by immersion is clearly pictured in Scripture for those who have believed. These believers were baptized as soon as possible after their conversion. There was no need for baptism classes, catechisms, or other such things. Their commitment to follow Christ was sufficient to warrant baptism. Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 2:41; 10:44-48; 18:8

5. Meeting from House to House - Constructing special buildings for the meetings of the Body together was unheard of in the early New Testament church. They met primarily in ordinary homes for their weekly meetings. It appears that they also met in larger gatherings at times for teaching, discussion of theological matters, and other times of mutual encouragement and worship. Acts 2:46-47; 8:3; 12:12; 16:40; 20:20; Romans 16:3-5; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2; 2 John 9-11

6. No Difference Between the Clergy and Laity - Within the church, there was differentiation based on gifts, not status. Ordination of people to the 'ministry' or to some office of the church as it is meant today is not supported by Scriptural teaching. All believers have been set apart by Christ to service in His Kingdom. The consecration and recognition of believers for specific tasks is recognized in Scripture, but not to some place of ministry above the other saints. 1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6

7. Decision Making By Consensus - This tradition is different from other forms of decision-making (i.e. democratic/majority rule, elder rule). The multiple, co-equal leaders lead by persuasion, teaching, and lifestyle, not by ruling over the flock. Therefore, the house church was leader-led, not leader-ruled. Likewise, all church members had a place in the decision-making process and worked diligently to achieve consensus (unanimous agreement) versus just letting the majority make the decision. We are one Body under Christ. We are to live together in unity. Acts 6:2-6; 15:22; Romans 12:4,5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:11-16

Church Autonomy: Each congregation has the privilege and the responsibility to discern and to follow God's revealed will under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and without imposition from religious bodies or merely human authorities. Christ alone is the Head over His Body. Colossians 1:18

Priesthood of the Believer: Each individual believer has the privilege and the responsibility to discern and to follow God's will as revealed in the Scriptures under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and without imposition from religious bodies or merely human authorities. This means:

that each believer has been gifted by God to minister in the Body and to the lost world. 1Corinthians 12:7,11, 18

-there is no Biblical distinction between 'clergy' and 'laity'. 1 Peter 2:5,9; Revelation 1:6

Accountability: Each church is responsible to live up to its covenant relationships with God, their Brothers and Sisters in the Lord, and the world. Likewise, each believer has the responsibility to fulfill their covenant relationships. We are to dwell in mutual submission to God and to each other. Matthew 18:15-17; Luke 12:47-48; Ephesians 5:21; James 5:16

Church Health: These are 3 indicators of church health:

Multiplication: The reproduction and multiplication of believers, leaders and New Testament churches. Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Timothy 2:2

Indigineity: Raising up home-grown, culturally relevant, and self-expressive house churches.

Fully Functioning: Each church fully functions in evangelism, discipleship, ministry, fellowship, and worship.

Relationships: The primary foundation for evangelism, teaching, congregating, equipping, and ministry is personal relationships - not programs or institutional approaches.

Missions and Ministry: 100% of the financial resources go to missions and ministry.

For more information about the DBA House Church Network, contact info@simplechurch.org

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I am amazed at how God is bringing together the Body of Christ in the Dallas / Fort Worth area! Churches are partnering with other churches for ministry. Denominational entities are working side by side. Believers are stepping across theological barriers to walk in unity and mutual submission one with the other. Traditional churches are embracing and blessing organic house churches. House churches are letting go of baggage from their past with institutional religion. Is this heaven? Is this some kind of utopia? What is going on here?!

God is on the move. Jesus' prayer for unity in John 17 is being answered. A Kingdom mentality is being unleashed in His people. The city church is arising. God's purposes are sweeping up the Bride. Wow! I stand in awe of the sovereign move of God that is afoot.

I believe that the Lord is laying the foundation for a harvest gathering church multiplication movement. His army is being positioned for an invasion of the kingdom of darkness. The spoils of war will be the souls of lost men, women and children. A revolution is underway and Satan is fearful.

So what are we to do? Pray, pray, pray! Our prayers are mighty. "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses (2 Cor. 10:4)." Prayer grenades need to be lobbed into the enemy's fortresses. Whether these be prostitution rings on Harry Hines Blvd., the bar scene in Deep Ellum, or the homosexual communities in North Oak Cliff or Oak Lawn, our prayers and witness can liberate the captives in these and other "fortresses." Let's hit our knees and pray fervently. I know God wants to demolish these, and other, fortresses and lead the men, women and children triumphantly into the Kingdom of Light through faith in Jesus Christ.

Pray. Prepare. Proclaim Jesus Christ. The revolution has begun.

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