

Neighborhood Church, Naturally!

By Wolfgang Simson

Wolfgang Simson, a German, who works with the DAWN ministry in Europe, has authored an e-book called "Houses that Change the World."

Not long ago, I was having lunch in a London suburb with a young couple in their flat. They had two children, aged three and one. Between bites of Yorkshire Pudding and sips of Darjeeling, I offhandedly asked the wife, "So, you enjoy your home group, then?"

She glanced at her husband, then somewhat furtively at me and said, "Well, you know..." and then petered out.

Her husband jumped in a hopeful tone, "Yes, we do, very much," trying to smooth over the situation somewhat.

"I think I understand," I said. "Let me see if I've got this... Every Sunday is a little shop of horrors. If the congregation only knew, what kind of a drama precedes your entry to the service (punctually 5 minutes late), I don't think you would be an 'elder couple' very long, right? You know what I mean: the kids are fussy, the toast is burnt, Grandma is sick, the dog has made a "mess", Dad can't find his tie and your scarf is ripped. Agitated and nervous, you just don't let it show! Cover it over with an "Everything's-all-right-please-don't-ask-about-me spirituality!" There you stand in the service until the weekly reprieve comes, when the Pastor says, "...and now the children can go to Sunday School!"

Now, at least on Sunday, the kids have Sunday School, but what about Homegroup? Wednesdays at 7:30 just don't work like that. Isn't that the way it is for you?" I asked. "Are you starting to think that your children are keeping you from getting closer to God?" (*Pregnant silence.*)

"And then, here I come, and I have the gall to ask if you enjoy Homegroup. Aren't Homegroups typically a mini-Sunday service, just without a 'Reverend' or an organ? But there's an additional hardship for young families: What'll we do with the kids? A babysitter? Or maybe the kids have to be in bed by 7:20 PM so you can meet everyone at the door with friendly smiles and witty greetings as they arrive.

"How's this for an alternative to House Church — actually Neighborhood Church or Street Church will do just as well. But it starts at 4:00 PM, not at 7:30. The wives get together, have coffee and visit together and with the children, sing some, pray some, talk, cry and laugh together. Then at 5:00 the husbands start to trickle in from work one by one. Instead of going to their own homes and dinner-tables they're also going to the Neighborhood Church tonight.

At 6:10 PM, that unsaved husband of one of your neighbors furtively comes in the door — for the first time after your 11th invitation, and that, mostly because he was invited to a supper, not to a Bible Study. He's nervous and stiff and shifts uneasily back and forth on his chair. His countenance says, "I know that you all want to convert me. I haven't the foggiest how you're going to do it, but I'm expecting the worst." At that instant, your 1-year old comes crawling in and makes a bee-line for his trouser leg. When he manages to grab the trousers he coos, "Abudah!" and smears some unidentified substance on them. Then he laughs as only a one-year old can. In that second, a miracle happens: From one moment to the next, the stiff neighbor and house-church leader have become 'daddies', glance at each other and start laughing. The little guy hasn't just eased the tension but also brought in a bit of human warmth into what you're neighbor had expected to find as a cold, formal, religious exercise. Suddenly, neither the atmosphere nor your neighbor are the least bit stiff. Everyone's much more natural and relaxed.

At about 6:30, everyone sits down to a "potluck" dinner, or perhaps a large pot of spaghetti, or as they do it in China, a large pot of noodle soup. There's some teaching at the table, but it happens like in the New Testament: conversations and discussions, during, not after the meal. People talk of their joys and sorrows, they share Communion, tell success-stories and bloopers, trade insights on razors and cars, pray for and prophesy over each other, joke with the kids, who are not hindering, but enriching the situation, and collect some money for an unemployed widow who's moved into the area.

Pretty soon it's 7:30, and time for a collective bed time story before everyone leaves, told by one person to all the kids (from 6 months to 60 years). Perhaps this is when the unsaved neighbor is hearing — and understanding! — the gospel for the first time....

How would all that suit you?" I ask.

"It's too good to be true," she says, "but what will our pastor think?"

Gently I interrupt her: "Let's face a tough one. Where's the easiest place for a man to be spiritual?"

Isn't it behind a pulpit, where one can preach to a whole distant crowd of people through a microphone? And where's the hardest place to be holy? Isn't it at home, in the presence of your kids and spouse? But that's also where the Gospel has the biggest impact, because the message of an ordinary life in an ordinary setting is its own litmus test and is much more authentic than an artificial message delivered in an unnatural setting. After all, when Jesus asked his disciples to go as his messengers two by two, he asked them to find a house of peace, eat what they give you, drink what they give you, heal the sick, tell them the kingdom of God has come, and stick with them — do not go from house to house. Not complicated at all, isn't it?"

After another pause, I asked them, "So, tell me, when are you going to start your Neighborhood-Church?"

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