

DECEMBER FEATURE

House Church Networks: A New Church for a New Generation

by Larry Kreider

Chapter 2 - A New Form of Church for a New Generation

Before we take a closer look at this growing, worldwide grassroots movement of house church networks, we have to clarify an important point. House churches should not be confused with cell churches currently found in many of our church communities today.

How "cell churches" function

More than two decades ago, a new wineskin many called cell church started to flourish to meet a growing need within the contemporary church. Many people realized traditional church methods were not meeting modern believer's needs. The church was building-bound, clergy-centered, and many Christians longed for a place to belong and be effective witnesses to the gospel. Churches soon realized that small groups (cell groups) can help people rediscover that they can "do the work of ministry." Left behind was a spectator mentality of church where the pastor does all the work.

Today, many churches utilize small groups that give everyone a job to do. Everyone's talents and gifts can be exercised to benefit others, and people can gain on-the-job training for leadership through hands-on experience.

The cell groups also provide a more natural setting for evangelism since they give the opportunity to do evangelism as a team. Together the cell group can identify and pray for God to use their group to reach the people of their personal oikos (from the Greek word household in the Bible. Our oikos are those people with whom we relate on regular basis—our co-workers, our families, those with whom we share a common interest such as sports or music, our dentist, our car mechanic, etc.). In a smaller cell group setting, nonbelievers are more easily drawn in and find a place to be loved and cared for.

With the cell system made famous through David Yonggi Cho's successful church in Korea, multitudes of cell churches emerged on the scene of church life and cut through all denominational lines. Some churches started as new cell-based churches, other churches transitioned to cell-based ministry and still others simply developed cell groups within their current church structure. Today most every denomination has some kind of cell group ministry operating within their church structure that aims to be a place where ministry and caring takes place on a more personal level.

However, current cell churches continue to function mainly within the traditional church structure. In other words, although believers meet during the week in homes, in many cases these cell groups still function as complementary ministries to the larger Sunday church meeting. A senior pastor leads this larger gathering and also oversees all the leadership under him in the cell groups. This structure, of larger meetings and smaller cell meetings, requires many cell leaders, assistants and zone pastors, all of whom are accountable to the senior pastor and his leadership team. Additionally, a cell-based church or church with cells also requires a headquarters or a church building to accommodate the various church functions.

How "house churches" function

House churches are entirely different. Although they meet in homes like cell groups, that's where much of the similarity ends. According to my friend Wolfgang Simson in his challenging and cutting-edge book, *Houses that Change the World*, house churches are not mere appendages of the larger church, but real, bonafide churches:

[Both] concepts look similar, but are really miles apart, because they build on different values, and a different understanding of church. Where the home group is a small part of the big and "real" church, a "mini-version" of the church, the house church in itself is the church in its fullest and most holistic sense.¹

Unlike the cell-based church or church with cells, each house church is meant to be a complete little church. Each church is led not by a cell leader and a team of assistant leaders, but by a spiritual father or mother who functions as the elder along with a small eldership team for the little church. He or she does not simply lead a meeting in a house, but rather provides an environment for people to grow spiritually in the context of everyday life. There is no need for a church building in which to meet because each house church is a fully functioning church in itself, meeting in a home.

This is not to say that a house church consists only of one group meeting in a house. I believe a house church should encourage smaller "cells" within the group to meet for prayer, encouragement and accountability outside of the actual house church meeting. One "cell" of people could regularly meet for breakfast before work and another "cell" could meet together to disciple a few new Christians in the house church.

House churches are simple to start, provide a natural setting for ministry, and are easily replicated. Could these new churches meeting in homes, places of business, coffee shops—anywhere people meet, be the new look of the modern church?

House churches are a relevant way to engage our communities with the claims of Jesus, according to a successful house church network in Canada:

House churches are simple, easily reproducible, create platforms for gift identification and development, and are effective in showing forth the transforming power of Christ in our neighborhoods and our communities. The postmodern anti-institutional mind, which will not enter traditional church, will come to my home. The Muslim or Hindu neighbor may not go to church, but they will enjoy Canadian hospitality. In the context of everyday life, the message and meaning of the gospel can be communicated in effective ways.²

Like the New Testament church, the house church network focuses on relationships, reaching the lost and raising spiritual fathers and mothers in-house who serve and care for their family. It emerges as a wonderfully fluid and flexible church. Small house churches are expanding rapidly because they meet a desperate need in church life today.

"Search for the right church ends at home"

The above line was the title of a New York Times article by Laurie Goodstein who

interviewed David Ketchum, from Ilbraham, Massachusetts who admits that for the last 12 years, he "dragged his wife and four children from church to church in a fruitless search for the ideal fellowship. Every time the new Yellow Pages came," said Mr. Ketchum, an elementary school teacher, "I would open it up to churches to see if there were any new ones I hadn't been to yet."

His search has found an end, in Wayne and Charlene Wilder's house church, almost on his doorstep. They have no pews, no choir and no pastor, only armchairs and other people seeking deeper Christian fellowship than they found in institutionalized churches. Professor Nancy T. Ammerman, sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, comments, "this development shows people looking for faith's essence. They are no longer willing to finance huge buildings, a large staff, insurance policies, advertising campaigns and the leaking church roof, because it all seems simply irrelevant." According to the New York Times report, an increasing number of Christians in the United States think like the Ketchums, and are setting to work themselves. The result is "do-it-yourself" churches in people's homes. Over 1,600 such house churches can be found on web pages in the United States alone.³

House churches network and reproduce rapidly

Some call the new wineskin emerging a new Reformation because it will radically change the look of church as we know it in our communities. This new kind of church meets in homes, where believers gather at least once each week to relate and minister to each other informally. These are actual churches, not just Bible studies or cell groups. They have elders, they collect tithes and offerings, and the leadership is responsible before the Lord for the souls of the people in the house church (Hebrews 13:17).

Each "house church," although a little church itself, is committed to network with other house churches in their city or region. This keeps them from pride, exclusiveness and heresy. Several new house church leaders I know (many in their 20's and 30's), tell me that their new house churches are planning to meet together once every month or so for corporate worship and teaching because they recognize the need to be connected. This desire to network comes from a similar desire to receive oversight from spiritual fathers and mothers so they stay accountable.

Additionally, these young leaders are intent on the rapid reproduction of these house churches. When they outgrow the house or place where they are meeting, instead of constructing a church building, they plant a new house church. Sounds a bit like the book of Acts, doesn't it?

A new form of church for a new generation

House church networks especially appeal to the young people of Generation X, because they offer the kind of casual and informal church experience to which they can relate. We need these new kinds of churches because they fit the heart, call and passion of the younger generations. Earlier this year, Religion Today published an article entitled "Look Out, Here Comes the Gen-X Church." Here is what they had to say:

...Generation X Christians are radically changing the church....The generation of 18 to 35-year-olds, less concerned about structure and hierarchy, are disconnected from traditional churches and starting small, informal fellowships....The churches meet in homes, coffee

shops, warehouses, fast-food restaurants, industrial complexes, parks, and other unconventional places. Relationships are the key...Generations Xers are loyal to each other over and above anything else." Sometimes this is a fault, when feelings receive higher ratings than the message. But this has not yet given rise to any major concerns of youth culture heresy. What usually happens is that this commitment to each other translates into loving concern, which is the key redemptive characteristic of the culture.⁴

We must change the way we "do church"

In his book *Boiling Point*, George Barna, a specialist in research on the Christian church and its effectiveness in our modern civilization, takes an in-depth look at the changing beliefs and attitudes of society today and how Christians must anticipate the world's spiritual needs. One of the innovations he suggests for "doing church" is to offer the house church as a structure for restoring community and authenticity to the church:

[House church] Popular in other countries, especially Southeast Asia, thousands of independent faith groups will meet for a complete church experience and expression within living rooms and garages...this option will appeal to individuals who are especially interested in restoring authenticity, community and simplicity to the church.⁵

Barna's extensive studies of the pervading culture cause him to see clearly that the gaping deficiencies of today's church fail to fulfill the needs of today's generation. There are many others who also believe the church of the future will undergo a face change. Many believe the young people of today will be the first ones to embrace this change. "Just wait for it," says Karsten Wolf, a youth church pastor from Germany. "Today's Generation X is tomorrow's mainstream society. What we are doing to change the way we experience church will greatly impact the way we 'do church' in the future," he maintains. He believes the youth culture churches of today will define the church of the future. Consider that:

1. Generation X is the largest single generation in the history of mankind, numbering in the region of a couple billion.
2. With the global media beaming the same message to the same generation worldwide, young people (aged 18-35) are more the same in their thinking today than ever before.
3. As this generation ages and—within the next decade— becomes the prevailing society, they will bring their changes with them. Whatever Generation X has done to the church will be lasting and normative.

"The young people of today, in 10 years or less, will be the society of the nations. That's why, if we shape new models of church today, we are shaping the church of the future. Youth culture churches may well revolutionize what church becomes in the future. We could be looking at an absolutely new form of church. I think we will need this new form of church to reach the nations," says Wolf. ⁶

Not only for the younger generation!

Let me emphasize that although the house church network appeals especially to the young, there are thousands of other "young at heart" people with the same vision burning in their hearts. Recently, I was with a couple in their early 70's from

Hamilton, New Zealand who are planting a new church in their home. They came to faith in Christ at the age of fifty. After having served faithfully in their community church for the past twenty years, they are now ready to launch out to plant a new church in their home with a vision from the Lord to see it multiply into a network of New Testament-like house churches in their community.

Believers are longing to find their place

I meet many believers, especially in North America, who have spent the past 20-30 years with a sense of unrest in their spirits. They love the Lord, but are discouraged. A couple of decades ago, they experienced a new wave of the Spirit sweeping across North America. They envisioned a radical New Testament church experience emerging from this spiritual renewal, but cumbersome church structure and traditional church meetings and procedures frustrated the dream. Now they find themselves in a "holding pattern." They dream of experiencing life-changing discipleship that transforms society around them, but they are not experiencing anything close to it now.

Deep in their spirits, they believe the Lord is about to make some radical changes in His church. They have been looking for something new, yet unsure of what they are looking for. They are passionately in love with Jesus, but feel unable to find their niche in the body of Christ.

Don't isolate! Find that connection

Some have become disillusioned, others have been hurt or even bitter at the church, feeling they are right and the rest of the church is wrong. They meet in their homes with like-minded believers, cut off from the rest of the body of Christ. There are entire books written advocating this type of unwholesome behavior.

We must "beware of authors who live in anger toward the established church," says Ralph Moore who is responsible for planting dozens of Hope Chapel churches throughout Hawaii and the west coast of the US. "The anger of man still can't work the righteousness of God."⁷ I totally agree.

House churches, and churches of any kind, should never be exclusive entities cut off from the rest of the body of Christ. The litmus test used to discern if a house church is healthy is simple. The healthy house church will focus on loving each other, reaching the lost and loving the rest of the body of Christ anywhere and everywhere.

Jesus "came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10), and He prayed that we would be one as the Father and the Son are one (John 17:21). Healthy believers will want to relate closely to the rest of the body of Christ because they want to be "one with the Father and each other."

God offers a richness through different Christian faith expressions. Each kind of church contributes its strengths to the others. We need each other. God uses different types of churches to accomplish His purposes. Each part of the church, regardless of denominational labels or structure, is a vital part of the body of Christ. God works through all of His people, giving us a sense of the broader community of Christ's body.

In the next chapters, we will look more closely at how God is working through His people in all of the current models of church life.

Notes

1 Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Change the World*, (Cumbria, UK: OM Publishing, 1998), pg. 94.

2 Bob Granholm, "Proposal for a House Church Network in the Lower Mainland (British Columbia, Canada)," October 1999, www.dawn.ch/HCGranhx.html

3 Laurie Goodstein, *New York Times*, "Search for the Right Church Ends at Home," April 2001.

4 *Religion Today*, "Look Out, Here Comes the Gen-X Church," January 2001

5 George Barna & Mark Hatch, *Boiling Point*, (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2001), p. 250.

6 www.dawnministries.org/europe

7 *House2House Magazine*, March 2001, p. 20

This month's feature is the second chapter of **Larry Kreider's** new book **House Church Networks: A New Church for a New Generation**, due out in December 2001.

Web site: www.dcfi.org or phone order **800-848-5892**.

Larry Kreider serves as International Director of DOVE Christian Fellowship International, training Christian leaders to make disciples with the small group concept. Larry and his wife LaVerne have been married 30 years, have four children, and live in Lititz, PA.

www.cell-church.org