

# What is the local church?

By Kurt Miller - Grace Brethren North America Mission

## 1) A Fundamental Question: What is a Local Church?

- Your church wants to plant a new daughter church.
- You are moving to a new community and want to start a new church.
- A group of young people get together and want to start a new church that is relevant to them.
- Your church is discussing how it should change to effectively reach its community.

Church planting and church revitalization is happening everywhere. And, it seems, everyone has a different idea of what a local church should look like. But before you begin to start a new church, or to revitalize an older one, it would be wise to understand what a local church is.

This question is not new to Grace Brethren North American Missions. In 1998 our Board of Directors, after two years of discussion, adopted the following statement regarding the definition of a local church: "For the purpose of resourcing a church multiplication movement, Grace Brethren North American Missions adopts the following working definition of a local church:

- A group of believers who are committed to being a church,
- Under the oversight of an elder or pastor,
- Who worship together regularly,
- Celebrate the ordinances,
- And are evangelistically targeting others.

You will notice that our definition leaves out non-essential issues of form and function. We wanted to arrive at the biblical "essence" of the church, defining what were the minimal "essential" ingredients according to the Word of God, for a local expression of the universal church. Once this was accomplished we found that we were free to encourage the planting of many new kinds of churches that would take on many different faces of form and function.

Several years ago I was challenged by God to "rediscover the lost art of starting new churches with little or no money." Our new working definition of a local church opened the door for discovery.

As a result, GBNAM is now encouraging church planters to ask God to direct them to different ways of starting churches, and God is doing just that. In the remainder of this newsletter, I will discuss one of these new church models and the philosophy that drives this concept of "church." The House Church Model is gaining wide acceptance and respect across America. It follows an early church example and is seeing many people become followers of Jesus and growing in their faith.

## 2) Small Groups vs. House Churches

"Small churches work hard to become big, and big churches are working hard to become small all over again." I discovered this truth after my last church plant. Once we purchased land and built a building, the dynamic of intimate community that we had enjoyed as a small church plant was lost, and we struggled to recapture it in some other form.

In response, many churches have turned to small groups that meet on Sunday mornings or an evening of the week, in order to provide for relationships and the study of God's Word. These groups often meet in homes and consist of people who have natural affinity with others in the group. In the small group, however, the functions of worship, baptism, communion, and governance are usually carried out within

the larger body of believers, typically called the church. The small group would not see itself as a distinct house church.

### **3) The House Church**

In the last few years, Church Multiplication Associates (a ministry of the Southern California/Arizona Grace Brethren District) under the leadership of Neil Cole, has developed a church planting model called "organic church." In his book entitled, "Organic Church Planting," co-authored by Paul Kaak, they state: "Most churches today are trying to figure out how to get lost people to come to church. The key to starting churches that reproduce spontaneously is to bring the church to the lost people. We're not interested in starting a regional church, but rather to church a whole region."

Organic churches are house churches. Cole and Kaak go on to say, "The house church, more than other model, is best prepared to do just that because it is informal, relational, mobile, not financially encumbered with overhead costs, and is easily planted in a variety of settings. It also reproduces faster and spreads farther because it can be a decentralized approach to a region, nation, or people group, and is not dependent upon heavily trained clergy."

They have taken their cues from Matthew 10 and Luke 10, where Jesus is giving instructions to His followers, immediately before sending them out into the harvest ministry. In these two biblical texts, Cole and Kaak believe, Jesus gives five key principles for how to initiate a ministry that reaches lost communities.

- Practice of Prayer - The church is conceived in Heaven before it is born on earth.
- Pockets of People - Bad people make good soil.
- Power of Presence - Jesus said to go. There is much power in showing up.
- Person of Peace - Look for people who are receptive, relational, and have a reputation.
- People of Purpose - When you go to pockets of people with the power of God, the person of peace brings several to Christ and a church is born. This is the formation of a people of purpose, born in the harvest, born for the harvest of the nations.

"Often, though not exclusively, the person of peace has the church meet in his/her home and may even be the new leader of the emerging church. A church that starts this way is unique in that it is born out of the harvest, is found among the harvest, and is bent on a mission to continue to reach the lost. Many house churches suffer from "koinonitis," where fellowship and community is the main and only thing. What is needed is a strong, healthy dose of mission."

### **4) The House Church DNA**

Felicity Dale, physician and co-editor of "House2House" magazine, wrote an article in the 2001 third issue about the essential qualities of a house church. She asks the question, "How often do we delay starting a church or "multiplying" one that is getting too big because we have no one to teach or lead, or no musician available? If we found a way of getting past these issues, we could start churches more rapidly.

Here in Austin, TX we are simplifying our meetings so that even young believers can take the lead. We are basing our times together on Acts 2:42, where 'they met together for the apostles' teaching, for fellowship, for breaking of bread, and prayers.' We come together for a simple potluck meal; we share what is going on in our lives; we read aloud a chapter of Scripture, stopping for discussion whenever anyone has a question or comment; and we pray for one another."

What, no worship? "Not in every group," she says. "Some home churches will have musicians and so worship will flow naturally, while in others they may sing a cappella. Some churches may rarely have singing."

Felicity lists four principles, or DNA, as to how this is passed on for church planting reproduction:

- Pray it into being
- Live it
- Talk/Teach it
- On-the-job apprenticeship training of new leaders

## **5) An Evaluation**

I am often asked, "What do you think about this house church movement?" My response is that anything that takes us back to the gospels, back to Jesus, in an attempt to rediscover the goodness and beauty of the kingdom of God is good. Jesus is the place where reconstruction begins.

Mark Scandrette, a church planter I have met and co-founder of Re/Imagine! (An incubator for Kingdom living in San Francisco), said it this way. "In our exuberance to see a faith movement in our generation, we confused the questions. We started by asking, 'What forms should the church take in this emerging culture?' When we needed to be asking, 'What does the life and teaching of Jesus mean in this time and place?' We made the church the kingdom instead of seeking the Kingdom as the people of God."

If the House Church Movement is about practicing and imitating Jesus' life in our neighborhoods, eating with the unlovely, engaging in classic spiritual disciplines, practicing hospitality, discovering the truths of the Word of God together, caring, admonishing, encouraging, and loving one another, then I am encouraged. It is an effective way of reaching the thoroughly post-Christian culture we live in today, a culture generally hostile to traditional Christian practice. My hat is always off to those who dare risk censure for following Jesus.

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