

# 11.

## House Churches

**Main idea:** We are called to “be” the Church, not just to attend Church. In the Book of Acts we see that the Church met daily, and from house-to-house (see Acts 2:42-47). We cannot expect 100% results if we put in 1/7 the effort. When we put in the effort, though, and start “being” the Church to one another– start being the Family of God– incredible things happen. We experience more intimacy in our relationship with God; we grow broader in our relationships with one another; and all of these relationships grow deeper.

From the outset, let me admit that pushing people to jump into house churches (or small groups, whatever you call them) runs directly counter to the idea that 1) worshiping in a large, anonymous group on Sunday mornings is enough for you to “grow” spiritually, and 2) that you can do the Christian life successfully alone. Of course, as we spell it out in the chapter on spiritual transformation, there are definite parts of the Christian walk that you must do on your own, and parts that you must do in a large group... but, there are also parts that can best be done in a bite-sized group... and we are substantially weaker in our faith when we neglect any of these three environments.

In *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, reflecting on September 11, 2001, Brian McLaren writes, “I would like to ask you to consider making the coming months, as long as this crisis continues, a special time of reflection on our mission. It strikes me that what we’re learning about terrorist cells has something to tell us about what it means to be a community of faith. Terrorist cells involve small groups of people secretly banding together, willing to give their lives for their cause, plotting how they can spread fear and violence to achieve their own ends. In much the same way, but with completely different motivation, the church brings together cells of committed people, willing to give their lives for God’s mission, plotting a spiritual revolution of love and hope and reconciliation to achieve God’s dream....”<sup>1</sup>

One of the tensions you find when looking for how to do small groups is that there

---

<sup>1</sup>See p135 of McLaren’s book.

isn't a great deal of information in print about those which are working. Increasingly, more good information will surface, as people figure out how to do it, then print their experience(s). Many of the groups you see now, though, are either dysfunctional or declining. Many people are frustrated with how they work, with their failure to deliver the promises of community and spiritual formation and discipleship. The much-discussed ideas of "doing life together" and "life change" rarely happen.<sup>2</sup> In other words, they don't function like a "good" version of the terrorist cells that McLaren describes above.

For a while, I felt that this was characteristic of *all* small groups— and that really caused me to pause for a while before truly implementing them at CCC. In other words, maybe the entire system was fundamentally flawed from the beginning. Sure, we see the church meeting daily and from house-to-house in the book of Acts, so there is some Biblical basis for small groups... but maybe the American manifestation of them just wasn't right.<sup>3</sup>

Many times, people get into groups for the wrong reasons. And, whether we realize it or not, that probably results in our disenchantment with the groups. While these reasons may sound fine on the surface, at the base level they are *not* good reasons for being in a small group.<sup>4</sup> Again, they are part of the reason that the groups may not work, and why they may leave us dry rather than full. Some of the reasons given for joining small groups are:

- *I want to learn more about God.* But, as we will see, the best "information giving" environment is really in the large group (perhaps worship service) setting.
- *I want to learn the Bible.* Again, you should go to a large group for information. You should go to a small group for transformation, as we will see.

---

<sup>2</sup>Before we implemented the house churches in the way we have at CCC, I sympathized with the following tension: "I always felt that there must be something exciting about the community which Jesus started and about which I read in the New Testament— but somehow I could never discover what it was... A church which not only has a message, but is the message..." (Wolfgang Simpson, *Houses that Change the World*, pp xii-xiii).

<sup>3</sup>I heard one pastor once tell me— and I believed it— that "Small groups are important to people that small groups are important to." This statement seemed— and still does seem— somewhat ironic. And, it leads me to believe that perhaps we've missed one of the biggest potential tools we have to be catalytic change-agents in our world— particularly if we create, as this chapter spells out, Biblically-functioning mini-churches instead of mini-worship services.

<sup>4</sup>We will run through some good reasons to be in them at the end of this chapter.

- *I want to get connected with other people because I am lonely.* Sure, we need friends. But, a small group will not fundamentally meet some of the personal needs that only time alone with God can cure.
- *I want to make Christian friendships.* In reality, you need more than friendship. You need a family. And you need accountability, not just disclosure, which is what friends are more apt to give you.
- *I want accountability.* We will talk about the difference between accountability and disclosure in a moment. Most often, people say they want accountability– but what they mean is that they want disclosure. Several authors I studied noted that there is a profound difference between 1) true *accountability*, in which we let others speak truth into our lives and correct us, such that we even heed their advice and warnings, and 2) *disclosure*, which is simply telling others what we are doing– and not really looking for advice or correction. Many times, small groups do not even get to the level of disclosure– much less, actually attain the level of accountability.
- *Our pastor says we should be in a small group.* If everyone did what the pastors said... everyone would be tithing, inviting friends to church, praying for their neighbors, doing ministry, etc...
- *I want to lead a group myself in the future.* Although you must first participate in a group @ CCC as an apprentice as part of the testing and approving process to lead, this does not in and of itself qualify you to lead. You must meet the Biblical qualifications outlined in 1 Timothy 3:1f, particularly the qualifications marked for deacons (which is how we perceive this role to function at CCC).

Although these are many of the reasons given why people join small groups, *none of them are really the reasons small groups exist in the first place.* Running through the reasons above, we see a few fundamental flaws. For instance, if you want to learn more about God and/or the Bible, is that really a fair expectation to place on a small group? Could this not better happen by taking a class– or by carving time to get alone with God by yourself each morning? If you're lonely, can a small group really fix that? Are there not other personal issues which must be dealt with first? Is a group really going to provide accountability for you? Don't we, most of the time, not really want to give others authority over our lives, but, rather, just tell them what we're doing and let them encourage us in it? And, if you're going to lead a group, shouldn't you meet the Biblical qualifications for a leader in the church, rather than

simply having attended a group?<sup>5</sup>

The above reasons caused me to not like small groups.<sup>6</sup> Despite having been involved in several of them— even with close friends— and of even learning more about Christ in them— they never delivered on what they promised. So, we found ourselves tugging our kids across town, unloading them, sitting in a group experience for an hour, then reloading them, driving back across town... and arriving home tired and wondering why we had even bothered.<sup>7</sup>

But what if I had been going about the group experience in the wrong way?<sup>8</sup> What if I had false expectations placed on the group experience because I had wanted them to achieve something they, at their base level, could not provide for me? With that in mind, I determined to look back at the Scriptures to see what they taught about small groups...

## Jesus as the model

When we jump into the small group experience we rarely consider that we are

---

<sup>5</sup>See 1 Timothy 3 for the qualifications for pastors and deacons, which are, really, good qualifications for all Christians to strive for. The point here is that a small group experience cannot qualify you to lead. Really, the qualifications given in Scripture are “character” qualifications, which can only be attained as you become more like Christ— and that is really more about spiritual formation than anything else.

<sup>6</sup>This is a true statement— I did not like them. However, I have come to realize that my frustration with them is not with the concept of small groups per se. Rather, my frustration with them is in how I have seen them done before. I think there is so much more potential for them to be the driving force of the church, as I believe they may have been in the book of Acts— if they are matched to their intended purpose (and not some other purpose that we lay upon them).

<sup>7</sup>Honestly, we “killed” the entire night doing these things. We would rush dinner after work, load the kids up... drive across town... spend most of the time listening to someone lecture... We would eventually start skipping, then skipping more.... then fade out...

<sup>8</sup>Wolfgang Simpson writes (in *Houses that Change the World*, p xv.), “Before they were called Christians, followers of Christ were called, ‘The Way.’ One of the reasons was that they had literally found the way to live. The nature of church is not reflected in a constant series of religious meetings led by professional clergy in holy places specifically reserved to experience Jesus. Rather, it is the prophetic way followers of Christ live their everyday life in spiritual extended families, as a vivid answer to the questions that society asks, and in the place where it counts most— in their homes.

engaging in a way of life which Jesus Himself lived.<sup>9</sup> Although Jesus and His disciples did not invent the small group idea– it was standard back then for a rabbi to have a small inner loop of disciples– they are Christianity’s first recorded small group. Typically, we look at the early Church in the book of Acts (Acts 2:42-47, particularly). But, in areal way, we should look even farther back, going a few years before the birth of the early Church to look at the life of Jesus Himself. In the Book of Acts we really see the disciples living out the implications of what Jesus had taught them to do. We see that, with Jesus, the disciples did a few important things:<sup>10</sup>

- They lived life together– daily.
- They were trained to become like Christ.
- They became a ministry team as they became a community.
- They were sent out to impact their world

There were other characteristics we see, too, which may not be as foundational. Still, though, they may be important in some way, as we adapt them.

- The members were invited into the group. They didn't just wander in. They were sought out to be part of that group. This is a another flaw I have seen in groups: *We don't pursue new people to be a part*. The groups themselves should grow over time, not dwindle as they usually do. A fundamental flaw, then, with some small groups may be that they are “closed” in nature– even under good guises. This was not how the early Church operated.
- The members of the group did not all know each other beforehand. Previous relationship was *not* necessary. Again, consider how this cuts across the grain of a traditional small group experience...
- They came from a variety of occupations & backgrounds– as opposed to gathering together based on the shallow affinity of their age, marital status, etc... they were gathered based on the unity they had in Christ. Look at the upper room to see how this group had grown from 12 to 120 in 3 years– and look at the diversity present in the group (see Acts 1).

---

<sup>9</sup>This section on Jesus and His small group is largely built on the ideas in Paul J. Prather, *Shepherding Small Groups*, on [www.EmergentVillage.com](http://www.EmergentVillage.com) ).

<sup>10</sup>These are important ideas to grasp, because we will be building the CCC concept of small groups– or house churches– on what we’re seeing here.

- They were of different ages. This relates to the point above and is very much at odds with the contemporary church experience in which everything is highly-specialized and consumer-friendly.
- They stayed together, really, for a long time— three years. Yet, when they needed to divide and separate in order to accomplish more ministry, they did so immediately, seemingly without question.
- Their true impact was not always apparent at the time— yet they are still being talked about today.

## Small groups have been focusing on doing the wrong things!

At the most basic level, we see that Jesus' small group had the goal of *spiritual formation*— defined as *becoming more like Jesus Himself!* And perhaps that is why it functioned (according to our findings above) much differently than the small groups we usually set up.

Elton Trueblood has said that, because of the life-change that can happen— and only happens— in small groups (when functioning correctly), “The church must be smaller before it can be substantially stronger.” Wolfgang Simpson (in *Houses that Change the World*) adds that “if we take this one step farther, this would mean that the church of the future will have to become much smaller, before it can become substantially bigger, by becoming more numerous. Statistically, it will have to shrink in order to grow.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, both of these men are saying that we need to do small groups— that we *must* do them. Perhaps, then, we have been doing them incorrectly.

One author writes, “Small groups function better as discipleship laboratories than as Bible studies, connection tools, social groups, or leadership development programs.”<sup>12</sup> If you become like Christ, you will know God more. You will learn more about the Bible. You will become more connected to His Church. You will live out the other reasons why people join small groups. But trying to achieve any of those other purposes without achieving this *one* will leave you with an empty experience.

Let me explain this using a metaphor I read in a book. One author writes of his experience in a high school chemistry class. “I had a chemistry teacher who began our first day of lab by writing the word *LABORATORY* on the chalkboard with big block letters. This is chemistry, and this is a laboratory, he announced. I expect to see a lot more of this... as he underlined the first five letters of the word to emphasize the ‘labor’ part... and a lot less of this... as he circled the last seven

---

<sup>11</sup>See p21 of *Houses That Change the World*.

<sup>12</sup>Paul J. Prather, *Shepherding Small Groups*, on [www.EmergentVillage.com](http://www.EmergentVillage.com), p8.

letters to emphasize the 'oratory' part."<sup>13</sup>

The author continues, "There is a difference between a laboratory and a classroom. A classroom is where information is distributed or opinions discussed; a laboratory is where one substance can be changed into another. You could distribute information and discuss opinions in a laboratory— and in high school and college we often did. But the more time we used up in a lab to do lecture and discussion, the less time was available to run experiments and observe results. Unfortunately, it doesn't work the other way; you can't do lab work in a classroom. And that's why our chemistry teacher wanted us to minimize our 'oratory'— because the more we used our lab time to do what we could do elsewhere, the less we were able to use our lab time to do what could only be done in the lab."<sup>14</sup>

When we break down a chart of the spiritual growth activities that can happen by ourselves, as opposed to those which can happen in a small group, as opposed to those which can happen in a large group worship setting, we see some startling things. My central point behind this chart is two-fold:

- 1) Small groups often tend to do things that other groups can do better. For instance, a small group leader usually spends the better part of their hour teaching a lesson— so that the group becomes like a church service without the singing. But, they cannot do a better job at that than the preacher could.
- 2) Small groups often neglect doing the things that only they can do— things like character development, sharing each other's stories, talking through where God is leading... This is something that a small group shepherd can do much, much better than a preacher.

<b>Can you accomplish this activity...</b>	<b>By yourself?</b>	<b>Small group?</b>	<b>At church?</b>
Scripture reading and intensive study	Yes	Yes	
Extended personal time with God praying	Yes	Yes	

---

<sup>13</sup>Paul J. Prather, *Shepherding Small Groups*, on [www.EmergentVillage.com](http://www.EmergentVillage.com) , p13.

<sup>14</sup>Paul J. Prather, *Shepherding Small Groups*, on [www.EmergentVillage.com](http://www.EmergentVillage.com) , pp13-14. The argument here is that Sunday morning worship can be more like a classroom— and that the small group can be more like a lab in which you apply and practice what you are learning. Both environments are necessary, and it is necessary that we do each task in the place most likely to accommodate it.

Biblical teaching		Yes	Yes
Relational evangelism <sup>15</sup>	Yes	Yes	
Events (serving, outreach, etc.)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participating in someone's spiritual journey		Yes	
Being influenced by Christlike character		Yes	
Observing God's work, up close, in others		Yes	

In this comparison, we see that whereas teaching *can* happen in small group, it may best be reserved for a large group setting, in which gifted teachers teach. Furthermore, personal study time can only happen on your own. But, participating in other's spiritual journeys, being influenced by them to become like Christ, and observing God's work and dialoguing about it can only happen in the context of a small group. Those are the aspects of becoming like Christ, then, which should be reserved for the small group experience. All too often, we tried to sub out our personal study time for the small group— or to cram teaching into it. Quite simply, we leave the group experience frustrated, having never become more like Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Because of this, we have opted to provide a sermon and study guide with each series we preach/ teach at CCC.<sup>17</sup> When the small groups— which we call "house

---

<sup>15</sup>Note, this— and events— is one of the only things that can be accomplished best in small groups. Even moreso than individually, perhaps, because in the small group non-believers actually see Christian community happen. All too often, though, we leave evangelism to happen in the large group setting, rather than in the environments where it can best happen.

<sup>16</sup>Part of the failure of traditional small groups is that they can provide teaching— but a gifted pastor will be able to teach you more in one sermon than you'll learn in the average small group experience. And, personal study time works best when... well... you study the Bible and get alone with God. In other words, most small groups do not focus on the things that *only* they can do, they focus on the things which other avenues can do *better*, anyway! Wouldn't it make sense, then, that we would let the small groups do what only they can do— and let everything in the church fit together to work together?

<sup>17</sup>The general consensus of the pastors/ elders at CCC is that we will strive to work through books of the Bible, generally taking an Old Testament book, followed by a New Testament book, followed by an Old... etc... This forces us to deal with issues with which we would normally not cover (it has forced us to talk about sex, foreplay and other sex acts, church

churches” (and we’ll explain why in a moment) get together– they are uniting not to teach or dispense information but rather to help bring about community and transformation– to help apply the text.

Two helpful reads here are Dan Kimball’s two books, *The Emerging Church* and *Emerging Worship*. In them he speaks about how we struggle to create the perfect worship service, and even throw our best– perhaps, our only!– energies into it. Yet, the greatest life change and true spiritual transformation can occur in the small groups. In fact, he argues that the small groups have a greater chance of bringing about true discipleship than worship services do– at the rate of about 90% to 10%! With this line of reasoning, we should expend 90% of the church’s energies into the “house churches” and only 10% into the Sunday services– yet we usually go just the opposite. This is something that is interesting to think about... and to consider how we might apply it.

In other words, spiritual formation, becoming like Christ, can best happen in the small group. It is the one place where we should focus those efforts, just as Jesus and His disciples did. When we fill that time with other activities– even good activities– we are functioning like the chemistry class in the example above, doing something good, but not doing something great. *Spiritual formation in community is the foundational goal of the small group experience.*

This is why the house church experience is so foundational to the growth track/ spiritual formation matrix– and why you are committing to getting into a small group if you become a member of our church. The problem has been that the groups usually focus on the top half of the chart, doing things that other environments can do better. At the same time, the group experience then neglects doing the bottom half of the chart– *never doing the things that only it can do!* Therefore, when we ignore the small group experience, we get a half-baked Christianity.

As Wolfgang Simpson reminds us– then asks, “Statistically, a traditional one- or two-hour ‘worship service’ is very resource-hungry but produces very little fruit in terms of discipling people, i.e. in changing their lives. Economically, it is a ‘high input, low output’ structure. Traditionally, the desire to worship ‘in the right way’ has led to much denominationalism, confessionalism and nominalism. This not only ignores the fact that Christians are called to worship ‘in spirit and in truth,’ rather than in cathedrals holding songbooks. It also ignores the fact that most of life is informal, and so too is Christianity as ‘the Way of Life.’ Do we need to change from being

---

leadership, and church structure, for example), it keeps from dodging certain issues (like money) while talking about all issues in the right amount of frequency that they appear in Scripture (like money, again)... and keeps us focused on God rather than reacting to circumstances around us. It is amazing how timely the Word of God often is to us, hitting us right when and where we need it, particularly when we have prayed through which book to study next. Of course, this method of study is a general rule of thumb, and not a legalistic norm.

powerful actors and start acting powerfully?”<sup>18</sup>

## Two basic premises then arise

If we look towards the bottom of the chart, then, we start noticing a few things about the group experience and how to make it work better.

First, we are looking for people to shepherd the group, not teach the group.<sup>19</sup> Individuals should study the sermon and study series on their own– and the parents should teach their children.<sup>20</sup> The bulk of the “teaching” happens during the corporation worship times. It’s too bad that the average small group leans heavily on the teaching gift, too, usually– when, all along, the small groups provide the best opportunity for *everything except teaching*. Whereas the teaching ministry of the church is important, there are other gifts and roles that are important, too. What is then needed is the practical application of those Scriptures.<sup>21</sup>

An overview of the difference between the individual shepherding role and the organizational leading role may be beneficial. Notice that in each of the charts that follow, small group leaders *should* tend to lean towards the left column on the chart rather than the right column, assuming our premises are correct.

---

<sup>18</sup>Wolfgang Simpson, *Houses that Change the World*, pxxi.

<sup>19</sup>Again, these leaders at CCC should meet the qualifications of deacons and will need to go through the testing and approving process before being released to shepherd a group of their own.

<sup>20</sup>The Puritians believed the “home” was a “little church,” and that fathers should minister as pastors of those little churches. This fits with what Paul teaches Timothy about pastoring in 1 Timothy 3:1f.

<sup>21</sup>More “work” should happen outside of the small groups, then, than in the small groups. The small groups are contingent upon the individuals in the group growing– and upon the depth of teaching in the corporate worship times.

<b>Shepherd</b>	<b>Leader</b>
Works with individuals	Works for organizations
Cares for small groups	Cares for large groups
Stands with, along side	Stands ahead, in front
Focuses on God's provision	Focus on God's mission/ vision
Deals with the present, what should be	Deals with the future, what could be
Monitors the daily journey	Monitors progress towards destination
Requires stability & routine	Requires momentum & achievement

In the church, both aspects (shepherding and leading) are important. And, we lose something if we overemphasize one– or the other. One church leader has suggested, “The Church should be led by those with the gift of leadership, taught by those with teaching gifts, administrated by those with administrative gifts, and shepherded by those with shepherding gifts.”<sup>22</sup> If leaders and teachers occupy the space reserved for shepherds, though, you can see how we lose!<sup>23</sup> And, if shepherds try to lead or teach... we see the breakdown which can and does happen, as well.

Second, the focus of the group is not– and this builds on the previous idea– to dispense new information. Rather, *it is to help bring about transformation– to facilitate spiritual growth and Christlike formation of character.* The following list will help clarify the differences between this type of group and other groups which you may have been part of. In these differences you will start to flesh out the type of small group experience that we are striving to implement:

- The goal is transformation, growing in character-- as opposed to just dispensing information.
- Shepherd prepares heart & spirit... rather than preparing facts and figures to download into people’s heads.

---

<sup>22</sup>This statement is frequently attributed to Bill Hybels, and does fit in line with what Paul teaches in Romans 12 about the use of spiritual gifts in the Body of Christ, and the division of labor.

<sup>23</sup>Often, having a gifted teacher lead a small group will result not in a time of discussion and community-building, but in a lecture instead!

- Activities are shared experiences, rather than a sit & listen experience.
- Discussion is based on sharing life stories instead of simple facts based on filling in blanks. This brings about an important point. Often, the goal of the group time is to get through the curriculum, so that you don't "get behind" for the next week. If we finish the curriculum, then, we take time for personal sharing, prayer requests, etc. However, in this new model, we do the sharing and prayer first– it is the goal. And, we move from that to discussing how to apply the text.
- Introspection required to discern progress, as opposed to looking at natural starting and stopping points (like finishing a discipleship manual or some other "class").
- Continual progress rather than progress based on finishing materials.
- Spiritual laboratory as opposed to spiritual classroom where you simply receive information. In a transformation-based group you actually do what you are learning.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Some of the best discussions, then, will center on the questions: 1) *What is God doing in my life? What have I seen Him working on in me this week?* (Not, what is He doing around me? What do I want Him to do around me, to others, etc... Go in with the idea, then, that God could, fundamentally, change us and work through us– that we might need to be the ones to change); 2) *What do I want Him to do in me?* (Again, not, what do I want Him to do to everyone else... but, again, change me...). In these questions we are really tapping into the idea of spiritual transformation...

In his book *The Present Future* (see pp84-87), Reggie McNeal writes about how home groups help achieve this:

This past week [one of the pastors in our denomination] has begun to receive pressure to "have a conference" on prayer. This is the way typical denominational types think and act. (Let me ask you: If the world could be changed through conferences and seminars, wouldn't it have happened a long time ago?). We don't need a conference on prayer. We need people to pray! People don't need notebooks on how to pray for spiritual awakening; they need encouragement to seek the heart of God. Before it's over, if we follow the typical path, we'll wind up "certified" prayer warriors...

He goes on to suggest that you learn not by getting information, but by practicing what you are learning. This is true of preaching, cycling, driving, weightlifting, drawing... and builds on what we talked about earlier in the chapter about the classroom verses the lab. The way you learn the Christian life, then, is by practicing it– not just by getting information about it. He

Really, we long for transformation and growth. Therefore, when we have an “information” and “leader” based group, we tend, anyway, to abandon the curriculum (even if informally) and opt for a time of sharing. Sometimes, the talk can gravitate towards complaints, gossip, and superficial topics.<sup>25</sup> Since we tend to want to “talk” it may help, then, to have a discussion that is driven on the text we are learning as a Church. This helps the small groups fuel the worship gatherings and allows the worship gatherings to supplement the small groups.

One author writes that, after these changes were made, “What happened is that we discovered a fresh approach to small groups: a shepherding-based format rather than a curriculum-based format. In moving beyond the standard “Bible study” approach to a group life, we rediscovered the importance of shepherding and recaptured the uniqueness of small groups. We found ourselves growing in

---

continues,

Jesus facilitated spiritual transformation in his disciples by introducing them to life situations and then helping them debrief their experiences. He taught them to pray. He did not lead them in a study course on prayer. He took them on mission trips (Samaria, for example); he didn't read books to them on the subject of missions. He sent them on learning junkets and exposed them to situations. He asked their opinion on what they were hearing and observing (“Who do you say that I am?”). He asked for radical obedience from them. He asked them to take up a cross and follow him. He did not send them to school and wait for them to graduate before giving them a significant assignment. He sent them out before they were ready to go and then helped them learn from their experiences. He talked about the Kingdom of God, but mostly he lived the Kingdom of God, practicing a life in front of his followers that modeled very different core values than those given to them by the Pharisees in the synagogues...

McNeal also adds that the place in which spiritual formation takes place is important, too. He adds,

The issue in spiritual formation is bigger than just location. It involves a philosophy of where spiritual formation is centered. In the modern world spiritual instruction was owned and operated by the institution of the church. In premodern and postmodern cultures the home was and is the center for spiritual formation.

In other words, allowing spiritual formation to center out of the homes in the area is not only economical (we don't need a bigger building!), it allows spiritual transformation to happen where it is 1) most needed, as well as 2) where it must be sustained—out in the world in which we live, not inside the four walls of the church!

<sup>25</sup>For instance, how many groups have you been part of which abandon the book after a few weeks?

Christlikeness, growing together as a little community, and experiencing real life change.”<sup>26</sup> This brings up a few questions:

- What would happen if small groups were shepherded instead of “led” or “taught”?
- What would happen if small groups had a mission and not just a mission statement?
- What would happen if small groups actually helped people become like Christ– As opposed to just talking about Him and getting a thicker head knowledge?
- What would happen if small groups really allowed for accountability instead of just disclosure?
- What would happen if small groups allowed people to share? Often, the goal of the group is to get the lesson done... so, the drive goes towards that end. If there is time left at the end of the group, then good... most often, though, there is not... and prayer doesn’t even happen, but the requests get emailed out. What if we reversed this?
- What would happen if small groups replaced answers & opinions with questions & stories?
- What would happen if small groups functioned like the church instead of a poor caricature of it?
- How would we pull this off?

## **Make the small groups accessible**

As I’ve mentioned, one of the biggest problems I’ve had with small groups is that, really, they’re a pain to manage. In other words, they’re not really accessible, as they’ve been done before, to real life.<sup>27</sup> It’s not that we shouldn’t have to go out of our way to do anything worthwhile. But, really, there seems to be a disconnect with the small group experience and the Christian life– and real life, too, for that matter.

Typically, you have to load the kids up and drive across town, for something that

---

<sup>26</sup>See Paul J. Prather, *Shepherding Small Groups*, on [www.EmergentVillage.com](http://www.EmergentVillage.com).

<sup>27</sup>Briefly, a few things that make small groups inaccessible: 1) adding an additional curriculum for people to study, in addition to what they are studying on Sundays, devotional times, etc.... 2) the time & space issues... such as being in the neighborhoods, near the people attending the house church...

doesn't last that long, for something you don't get that much out of. You kill an entire evening doing something that, frankly, you wished you hadn't bothered with. After all, you wind up more tired, more frustrated, and more like you were when you started.

In addition, you often have to pick up another study guide— adding something else to what you were already doing in your own times with God. This means, practically speaking, that you could be keeping up with one series during the sermons on Sundays, a book for your own devotional time, as well as one for the small group. We have eliminated this and determined to study the same thing across the board— in all arenas— insuring that we have the best possible chance of truly taking in the information and allowing the Word to conform us, by allowing each individual area to impact us in the greatest possible way that it can. How often have you joined a group— only to discover that no one read the book, that no one was prepared? How often has the “teacher” come unprepared? It's not that we don't love God... maybe there's just a disconnect here.

With all of these time issues and space issues colliding, wouldn't it be better if there could be some alignment with what we were already doing, such that we didn't need to create something else, another study, just so that we could have the small group, but, rather, the small group would fuel the spiritual transformation that is already trying to happen? This goes back to the idea of making the small group an experience that stands as a bridge between the preaching ministry of the church and the individual study time everyone is— or should be— doing. It links these two together, helping provide practical application to the text as we involve ourselves in it and in the faith journeys of others around us. In this way we begin to reinforce what we are already learning— rather than duplicating or adding extra things to our “to do” list.

Perhaps the greatest change that can happen to make the groups accessible, as well (and this is where this model is different than others), is that we break them down geographically, rather than by age, life situation<sup>28</sup>, affinity, or some other designation. Rather than driving across town, walk down the street. This allows you to spend more time in the group<sup>29</sup>, gives the group a greater chance of experiencing

---

<sup>28</sup>This creates a small group (or house church) that is more like the Family of God than some artificial designation based on affinity. It allows for older people and younger people to serve together, and minister to one another, each bringing their own experiences and strengths (and weaknesses) to the table.

<sup>29</sup>How many times have you driven 20-25 minutes for a one hour Bible study, only to drive all the way back? That's two hours. What if you could take 5 minutes for travel time, and spend the two hours with the group, spending 45 minutes building community by hanging out, spend 25 minutes praying together and for each other, spend 35 minutes talking about the practical application of the sermon text, spend 15 more minutes laughing and talking...?

community<sup>30</sup>, and allows us to take the church into the world.<sup>31</sup>

## A workable model... something more holistic & integrated

Thus far, we have talked about why small groups don't usually work, the need for shepherding in the groups rather than teaching, and the need for making them accessible— in terms of:

- 1) Allowing them to work with our current spiritual growth patterns, and
- 2) Placing them close to our homes so that we can integrate this experience into real life.

We use the word *SERVICE* as an acronym to help us understand the small group— or house church— model we are seeking to live out.<sup>32</sup> What follows is a brief description of the headings for each letter which will add more color to the outline we have sketched thus far:

Spiritual formation  
Evangelism  
Reproduction  
Volunteerism  
Intentionality  
Care  
Everyone

## Spiritual formation

The goal of the house church experience is, first and foremost, spiritual formation<sup>33</sup>,

---

<sup>30</sup>If you are closer, you can get together with your group more often, in “unplanned” events, such as movie nights, etc.

<sup>31</sup>In this way, we start planting small “house churches” in every neighborhood in the city. As the group gets large and needs to divide, we divide it— again, geographically, making it a more dense saturation of Christ followers in that neighborhood. There is more about this in the following pages, and how, practically, plays out.

<sup>32</sup>This is adapted, with some significant changes, from Randy Frazee's *The Connecting Church*, which is, again, a helpful read for understanding this model of small groups better.

<sup>33</sup>Again, small groups— or, *house churches*, as we will call them forthgoing, are primarily not about teaching a Bible study, hanging out, giving people something to do, etc... They are about Christ— and about creating an environment in which we can become most like Him.

an activity that can really only happen in a safe environment in which people openly share– and are shared with– and where people are *accountable* to and for others. This idea of spiritual formation is central to the house church experience. Do not think of hidden Chinese churches in Asia when you hear the word “house church.” Really, these are small expressions of the church designed to function like a church– and carry out the functions of the church. One author notes that our individualistic American mind-set militates against this: “In the typical American Christian small group, we love to use the word *accountability*. But, if we are precise in our definitions, we rally don’t have accountability; we only have *disclosure*.”<sup>34</sup>

In a relationship that is truly accountable, people are given authority to speak truth into your life.<sup>35</sup> They can give you correction, for instance, when you are contemplating a foolish job decision, when you are looking at adding more debt to your financial picture, or when you are facing a move. Likewise, they can encourage you in the same things. All too often, we just want to tell people what we’ve already decided to do– and have them “pray for us.” We don’t want them to pray, seek God’s will, and speak for God to us. Yet God often speaks to us in community. All too often, if we hear advice that is unacceptable to us, we just leave.<sup>36</sup> Yet if we don’t let others shape us to become like Christ– if we want disclosure and not accountability– how are we ever going to change? How will we be spiritually transformed?

Of course, this sort of small group experience is counter-cultural. Yet most of what we do a church is...<sup>37</sup> We give away a portion of our income rather than spending it

---

<sup>34</sup>See Randy Frazee’s *The Connecting Church*, p57.

<sup>35</sup>“In a study in Scotland in 1994 under the title Barriers to Belief, Reverend John Campbell says, ‘Many have indicated that one of the greatest barriers to belief in God is the church itself.’” This would include the way the church presents itself and keeps people from being able to grow spiritually by not creating the necessary environments for life-change to occur. Of course, the flip side to this argument is that many people do *not* want to grow (no matter how much they talk about it, or they would likely change their behaviors)– they want to be comfortable with the status quo. See Wolfgang Simpson’s work *Houses that Change the World* for more info (here, I’m quoting p12).

<sup>36</sup>Many people do this– even leaving churches when they receive advice, Biblical advice, that confronts some foolish thing they had already determined they were going to do. And, it really puts leaders and other Christians in an unfair place. Do we tell the person something that is unBiblical in order to appease them? And to keep their favor? Or, do we all love each other so much that we agree to let each other openly speak the Truth of God into each other’s lives?

<sup>37</sup>One pastor suggests that “This is not just the same old message with new methods... We’re rediscovering Christianity as an Eastern religion, as a way of life. Legal metaphors for faith don’t deliver a way of life. We grew up in churches where people knew the nine verses why we don’t

all. We believe that men should lead in the homes. We love our neighbors as ourselves. We marry and stay together. The list goes on...

As the goal of the house church is to assist others in spiritual formation, several things can happen...

- The members of the house church can hold each other accountable for spiritual formation.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps each couple or individual could have “stage time” each week (one per week) to discuss where they are, what areas in which they need work, how others can pray for Christ to be formed in them... allowing people to speak truth to them as they speak truth to others...<sup>39</sup>
- The members of the house church can hold each other accountable for living out the purposes of the Church. For instance, as we will discuss in a moment, each member of the house church should be praying for the salvation of at least three other people they know– and praying for opportunities to minister to them.<sup>40</sup> Having others continually asking us about this keeps it at the forefront of our minds, and keeps us looking for ways to minister to others rather than receiving attention ourselves.
- The members of the house church can help the others consider where God is moving in their lives. Perhaps we should ask each others in these gatherings questions like: Where is God working

---

speak in tongues, but had never experienced the overwhelming presence of God” (Rob Bell, quoted by Andy Crouch in “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today*, November 2004).

As you will see as we work through this chapter, the house church experience is about, primarily, linking your faith to all of life... and about surrounding you with a group of people who are striving to do the same thing. You push them forwards in their journey– and they push you. Together, we become more and more like Christ, which is the goal of the Christian life.

<sup>38</sup>This might include, but would not be limited to, making sure each person is moving through the growth track @ CCC (see the chapter in this book on spiritual formation for more about that).

<sup>39</sup>As needs become obvious in the group on a large scale, then, we can offer what is needed directly to that house church. For instance, if financial seminar is not scheduled for another three months at CCC as a whole, yet that house church needs it, it can be brought directly to the house church. The house church, then, becomes the frontline of ministry.

<sup>40</sup>That is, you look for tangible ways to truly minister to them. Without putting some intentionality behind this, who actually does it?

on you? What is He teaching you? What do you want Him to do in you? Questions like these remind us that spiritual formation is about God changing us, rather than always appeasing us by alleviating our circumstances. Let's be honest... Many of us never change internally because we're so focused on what's going on around us in the environment in which we find ourselves. We, then, change our church, change our job, our friends... and, all along, we are the ones needing to change. The house church environment allows that change to get pushed to the forefront of your life.

## Evangelism

The house churches should all be outwardly focused. Rather than shutting down communication and openness and honesty, this should open it— because you will see God moving in others lives to a really dramatic extent.

As we mentioned a moment ago, what if each member of the house church was praying for at least three friends or neighbors or coworkers— people needing to know Christ. The goal was to have an opportunity to minister to them— then to bring them to a weekend worship service or the house church. There would be new people in, then, quite often. Some people would come to the house church... and perhaps stay there for months before ever attending a worship service. But this would be OK, because we are leading them towards Christ. Some of them would, eventually, be saved.

In *The Radical Reformation*, Mark Driscoll writes, "One of the most fascinating aspects of reformation evangelism is that lost people actually function as missionaries themselves before their conversion. Lost people commonly speak with lost family members and friends of what they are learning about Jesus, even inviting them to church and introducing them to their Christian friends. Hence, reformation evangelism is careful not to sever lost people or new Christians from their tribe of lost friends, because those relationships present further opportunities for evangelism. The only exception would be if those relationships were causing someone to fall back into habitual sin."<sup>41</sup> The following chart illustrates how this might happen:

---

<sup>41</sup>p70. The chart is adapted here from Driscoll, p68.

<p><b>Routine Presentation Evangelism</b> (Believe in Jesus, then belong to the Church)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gospel information is presented.</li> <li>2. Hearers are called to make a decision for Jesus.</li> <li>3. If an affirmative decision is made, the person is welcomed into the Church.</li> <li>4. Then friendship is extended to the person.</li> <li>5. The convert is trained for service in ministry by being separated from the culture.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Relational, Participation Evangelism</b> (Belong to the Church, then believe in Jesus)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A genuine, spiritual friendship between a Christian and a non-Christian is built.</li> <li>2. The non-Christian sees authentic faith and ministry lived openly and participates in it.</li> <li>3. The Gospel is naturally present in word and deed within the friendship.</li> <li>4. The non-Christian's conversion to Jesus follows his or her conversion to Christian friendships and the Church.</li> <li>5. The Church celebrates the conversion of their friend.</li> </ol>
---	---

Using the method above, the members of the house church reach out into their neighborhoods. They invite people into their small church. And, of course, as the churches grow, they divide, again, geographically. This is an important point— we have determined to map the house churches geographically, rather than by age, life station, affinity, or some other designation. This makes the house church a microcosm of the Church, which should be a microcosm of the Kingdom of God. And this makes the church more accessible.

Wolfgang Simpson makes the following observation which I wish to apply in some way to our context. He writes, "I see the present church organized into 4 levels: a. the house (where organic fellowship is possible, irrespective of what we call it); b. the congregational church (the traditional meeting-oriented denominational church); c. the city or region; d. the denomination (the network, conference or organization of denominational churches of an area).

"While the traditional church is typically focused on two levels (b and d), the cell church would be focused on b. The house church, however, allows us to regain a focus on a and c. The church in the New Testament was named according to its geographical location, not denomination. With a new wave of house churches, this also opens us up way back to the 'city church,' literally the church of the city— all Christians of a city or region together..."<sup>42</sup> In some way, this allows for natural church planting at various locations throughout the city, greater resourcing for missions

---

<sup>42</sup>*Houses that Change the World*, pp37-38.

needs, etc. In other words, we want to focus on levels a and c above, as well, instead of falling the trap of leaning on b and/or d.

In the foreword to Erwin McManus' book *An Unstoppable Force*, Brad Smith writes, "We see church leaders progressing beyond the church growth movement of the 1980s, which opened up a new awareness of the culture around us. They're also moving beyond the church health movement of the 1990s, which created a new emphasis on intentional discipleship. What church leaders are increasingly talking about is church dispersion. We've worked so hard to get people back inside the church and on a path to maturity; how do we move them back outside of the church to serve in the marketplace, the community, and the world? Church growth and church health really don't make sense without church dispersion yet that may prove to be the most difficult task yet..." The home group structure of discipleship and spiritual transformation actually does much to achieving all of these ends— at the same time.

In addition, this blurs the lines between evangelism and discipleship, allowing both processes to begin taking place. When people come to Christ, then, they are already in the process of spiritual formation. They don't "accept" Christ, then start a new life. The new life is already underway, insuring that many of these people will actually follow through on their faith commitment. In addition, this then results in a conversion of one's lifestyle. The decision to follow Christ, then, becomes less of a mental choice to believe certain things only and becomes more about all of life. It is very likely that, today, many people wrongly believe they are saved just because they have some theological facts in order in their head about Jesus.<sup>43</sup>

Dieter Zander suggests, "The potentially endless proliferation of new subgroups begins to look like it is based on nothing more substantial than catering to new styles. That kind of shallowness won't last."<sup>44</sup> Breaking the groups geographically rather than on age may be somewhat countercultural, too, but there are several good reasons for doing it this way:

- It is Biblical (see 1 Timothy 5:1f.)
- It is the best way to learn from all different sorts of people.
- It affirms the value and contribution of every age & circumstance.
- It ministers to those with "gaps" in their lives (i.e. what about single mothers whose kids would, otherwise, never see Godly men?).

---

<sup>43</sup>By the way, recall that The Billy Graham Association suggests that as many as 50% of church members may not be authentic Christians— just members of an institution!

<sup>44</sup>See Dieter Zander, *The Evolution of Generation-X Ministry*.

- It makes the groups more accessible to everyone because of the geography.
- It makes the kids part of the experience (often they are excluded from this spiritual formation).
- It allows us to divide and replicate the groups in the easiest, most natural way as they grow.

This, too, results in evangelism as a lifestyle for believers rather than an awkward conversation that never quite starts. And, it puts the emphasis of evangelism where it should be— *by Christians living in the world*— rather than laying the responsibility only on the church staff, on a department in the church, on a program, etc. Sharing our faith becomes part of life.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Andy Stanley writes, “During the first year of our [church’s] existence we crafted the phrase ‘invest and invite’ as a way to challenge every leader and attendee to make outsiders their priority. This simple statement suggests that every person is responsible to make a personal investment in someone’s life and bring them to one of [our church’s] environments. The concept has been contagious with everyone from leaders and elders to staff and attendees. We even know of some unbelievers who have invested and invited outsiders!

“When an insider invests in someone outside the church, something changes. The heart follows the investment, and the result is an authentic relationship between an insider and an outsider. That’s why Jesus said, ‘Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also’ (Matthew 6:21). What we have seen happen in the hearts of insiders has been just as significant as what we have witnessed in the hearts of outsiders. The ‘invest and invite’ strategy has affected our church in a number of ways.

“The ‘invest and invite’ strategy has radically changed our approach to evangelism. Many of us grew up in churches that taught evangelism classes, gave altar calls, handed out tracts, and sent members to knock on the doors of strangers. However, none of these approaches effectively mobilized the majority of members to become personally involved in reaching the unchurched. To the average believer, most of these techniques seemed too confrontational or awkward. And so the responsibility for evangelism was usually assumed by a handful of trained ‘experts.’

“Later, many churches shifted towards a more natural approach, giving rise to a movement known as ‘lifestyle’ evangelism,’ or relational evangelism. The idea was that everyone reprioritize their friendships to make sure they were investing in someone who needed Christ. This encourages spiritual dialogue in a safe context of authentic friendship for both the insider and outsider. It’s the opposite of the typical ‘car salesman’ approach to evangelism. Lifestyle evangelism works in concert with the way relationships naturally happen, and it is something that almost every believer can do.

“There is only one problem. This approach can come up short for a number of reasons. For example, every believer speaks from a different level of spiritual maturity. What do you do when you have taken a friend as far as you can? Where does your friend go then? How do you explain issues you may not feel equipped to explain? That’s why we say ‘invest and invite.’

## Reproduction

One of the goals of the house churches, then, as they grow, is to start new house churches. We will do this by dividing the house church in half after it reaches a certain point in its growth. Again, the boundary will be geographic, making the presence of the church in the culture even more dense, making the opportunity for true community and real ministry more accessible to even more people.

Some churches may divide faster than others, depending on where they are, how growth occurs, etc. It is important to remember that simply multiplying the house churches is *not the goal*. Rather, *spiritual formation of the people in those churches is the goal*. However, as the people are praying for their lost friends and neighbors, and as they are following Christ, growth will happen. When this occurs, it is time to divide and keep doing the Gospel.

New leaders will come from the existing house churches (again, we are dividing geographically, so they must be in the church that will be dividing– thus 1) making them close to the new locus of ministry, and 2) giving them time to test and approve for the position<sup>46</sup> during the run of the first house church). Again, the split will happen geographically, whether it happens in 6 months or 2 years. There are several reasons for this:

- This militates against “clicks” in the Church.
- It keeps us progressing towards our goal of taking the Gospel to all people.
- We can still have “area” fellowships for all the people that came from the original house church in that area– even though there will be many new people every time that fellowship happens.<sup>47</sup>

---

The invite allows the believer to bring a friend into an environment where such issues can be addressed...” (See *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry*, pp146-147).

In addition to bringing the friend into an environment where others can help answer question, the person sees the Christian faith authentically lived out– and it is Christian community which Jesus Himself said would convince the world of the Gospel and its power (see John 13:34-35).

<sup>46</sup>In my thinking, house church shepherds should meet the qualifications for deacons in the New Testament. See the attached chapter on qualifications for more information on this.

<sup>47</sup>Our thinking (and reading) suggests that after sharing a close experience with someone in the home church/ house group, you will have a certain depth of relationship that sustains– even if you do not see them every week.

- This makes the Gospel more saturated in the area– it makes the proliferation of Christians in the neighborhood more dense as you split from having 1 house church in an area to having 2... then to having 4...
- This could lead itself, naturally, to church planting or satellite services in the future, perhaps, if a large contingent of house churches end up on one side of the city.
- This allows us to grow stronger and deeper as we grow bigger and broader.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Consider if we start four house churches with 25 in each (including the kids). That's 100 people. If each of those double and divide in one year, and the beginning of next year we have 200 people in 8 churches... then... the next year... 400 people in 16... 800 in 32... 1600 in 64... 3200 in 128... Think about how our city would change? Consider the proliferation of the Gospel?

On author draws this out with a different scenario, assuming that each church grows to split back down to 12 people (which is a good number). He assumes, too, that 25% of the churches will not split, which accounts for some attrition that is likely. And, he assumes that the first year will experience no doubling, because that year will be taken to truly train people. He offers the following chart as a guideline to look at the impact house churches could truly have in an area:

After year	Number of house churches	Number of people
1	only 1, not 2	12
2	2	24
3	4	48
4	8	96
5	12 (= 16, less 25%)	144
6	24	288
7	48	576
8	96	1,152
9	192	2,304
10	288 (= 384 less 25%)	3,456
15	6,912 (= 9,216 less 25%)	82,944
20	165,888 (= 222,184 less 25%)	1,990,656

From Wolfgang Simpson, *Houses that Change the World*, p107.

## Volunteerism

It is possible, too, that the house churches could be of great help to the overall ministry of the church as a whole. Consider the big projects we typically do– the Fall outreaches come at the same time that Christmas arrives. What if we allowed one house church to organize each event...? Everyone could “show up” to work the event, but think about how the ministry load would be spread?

Or what if the house churches took on some of the ongoing ministries at CCC? Perhaps one church runs the host teams for one month, another for the next, etc... Or we allow the house churches to follow up on visitors by contacting the ones that come from their area. In a real way, the house churches could fuel the larger ministry at CCC simply through organizing ourselves to come together around that common purpose.

## Intentionality

It is important to note that this is not a “random” idea or a “hit and miss” type of thing. We want to align all of the ministries of CCC together, so that the structure is simple, straightforward, and do-able.<sup>49</sup> And, we want to set things in place that will accomplish what God has called us to do, rather than just making us busier. Even though this is a new idea and is not how things have always been done in other places, or in the past, this is where we feel God leading us, and that this is His design for us to minister to our city. Every aspect of the house church ministry is happening on purpose:

- They are in the neighborhoods and not our worship facility on purpose.
- They are intergenerational on purpose.
- They are not teaching-driven but are supplemental to the preaching and individual study times you are having on purpose.
- They supplement the ministry of the larger church on purpose.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup>As we have mentioned before– many churches try to do too many things. We want to do a few things very well– and make sure that everything is pushing in the same direction.

<sup>50</sup>A subsequent footnote discusses how the house churches provide an avenue for us to do the mission/vision statement of CCC. Another interesting “look” at the core values shows how they fill these, too:

- *Biblical Authority.* The house churches provide the “middle step” that we’ve discussed between the preaching of the Word and the individual times you spend in it on your own.

- They are relational on purpose.
- They are outreach-oriented on purpose.
- They are decentralized ways of doing ministry on purpose.
- They are striving for spiritual formation on purpose.

The goal of the church, “to lead people into an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ,” that is, to help believers spiritually form to become like Him as they come to know Him is central to what the house churches are about. And, we have designed them to bring about, or have the best chance of bringing about, that results.

If you notice our vision statement, it suggests we “lead people into an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ... by creating life-giving environments where people are encouraged and equipped to pursue intimacy with God, community with the fellowship, and ministry to our world.” Note the three environments that we create—or, the three relationships, really. We have relationships to 1) God, 2) to the church fellowship, and 3) to our world. The house church helps build on these... the goal is to push you forwards in 1) your relationship with God, which manifests itself 2) in being related— closely— to the Body of Christ. In turn, this group of believers turns and 3) ministers to the world in which we live, starting in your neighborhood.

- 
- *Intentional Community.* The house churches provide, intentionally, an environment where believers— and nonbelievers— can come together to relate to each other through Christ.
  - *Relational Evangelism.* The house churches become a first round of contact with our neighbors, an ongoing event to invite them too (even if you don’t call it a “house church” to them), etc.
  - *Radical Stewardship.* We share the places we live, we share our possessions... we do life together.
  - *Incarnational Gospel.* We are taking the Gospel out of the four walls of our facility and into the world...
  - *Strategic Service.* Everyone ministers in the house church environment, not just the teachers, which is often the case in a small group.
  - *Intimacy with God.* The purpose of the house church is to push people— Christian or not— closer to Christ. Spiritual formation is central to this experience.
  - *Authentic Worship.* This one is a little more difficult to clarify— but, the house church does make all of life worship. It makes us intentionally live out the things God has outlined for us, as the Body of Christ, to do.

## Care

One of the goals of the house church is to get as many people involved in doing ministry as possible.<sup>51</sup> Whereas most small groups tend to lean heavily on the teaching gift, we are creating house churches to lean equally on the gifts of everyone involved. This is Biblical– the leadership of the church should not do all of the ministry, but, rather, release the people in the church to minister.<sup>52</sup> In a real sense, this is also necessary– as a church we have crossed the line such that the pastors cannot provide all of the ministry.

The house churches, then, become a group of interdependent people– as opposed to a group of independent people (We have not used the word “community” here because it’s so over used). One author suggests that “by and large, [what the world sees as] successful churches are not really building community, but they are doing a great job of marketing consumable services to individuals.”<sup>53</sup>

We want to build community, not provide goods and services. Out of the context of community, the true “goods and services” (hope, love, care, ministry, compassion) will emerge. In other words, we don’t want you to *attend* our church, we want you to *be* the church. We don’t you to just be served by the church, we want you to serve in it as you are being served.

A “me first” “meet my needs” “serve me” mentality will be the death of any ministry. This is, again, one of the counter-cultural ideas we are hitting in ministry, yet it is much needed. By building house churches, small growing pockets of Christ followers from our church out in the neighborhoods of our city, we are creating a frontline of ministry<sup>54</sup>:

- House churches can visit those who are hospitalized.
- House churches can take food to the new mothers in their area after the baby is born.

---

<sup>51</sup>As opposed to the typical model which allows one person to host, one to teach... and everyone else to simply receive. The new model creates a “give and take” approach in which everyone contributes– and receives– much.

<sup>52</sup>See Ephesians 4:1-16, for example.

<sup>53</sup>Randy Frazee, *The Connecting Church*, p183.

<sup>54</sup>Again, the house church would not be the only line of ministry– it itself would be supported by the larger church structure. However, look at the examples listed in the body of the text above and see how this might put a more tangible “face” on the church.

- House churches can call new visitors to our church and members who live near them.
- House church members can help each other, first of all, with the basic needs of life.<sup>55</sup>

## Everyone

One question related to this point is When is the best time to meet? Another is, How long does a meeting last?

My thought is that a meeting should last at least two hours... What if you actually took a Sabbath on Sunday, and did no bills, no house work, no grocery shopping, no yard work, no catching up for a busy work week, etc... And, after worship that morning, you took a nap, or watched a movie, or read a book... and rested...

Then, gathered at someone's home near your from about 5:00 to 5:45 for a meal, or light snack supper that each of you have helped provide. You used this time to talk and catch up– and maybe talk about what you learned in the Scripture or the sermon or maybe not. Since you have all been studying the same things, it's possible that these conversations will happen naturally, and without questions to start them... Maybe from 5:45 to 6:00 you pray together for needs in the group– and for the three people each of you are praying for.... Then, from 6:00 to 6:45 you dismiss the kids to play outside, in another room, etc., if they are young, while you dialogue about the Scriptures... and the needs you have... And, if someone in the group needs ministry or has a need, you deal with that moreso than the text– because you've already been taught the text, and you're studying it on your own, anyway, and you can get back to that pretty easily... Maybe you pray again before you end your time together, then just hang out some more with everyone... There is not a set "ending" time in which people just "leave." Everything just happens naturally.

Is Sunday the only day this can happen? No, this is just a suggestion, and will need to be negotiated with the house church. Remember, too, although we want everyone to go to the church in their neighborhood, if you can't make it do to work or other obligations, go to another one that meets at a different time...

Our natural tendency is to think we're too busy to do things as we've been describing above. That we can't spare that down-time during one evening. Or that we don't even need something like this. One author reminds us...<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Seriously, where do you go if you need help with your yard, you need to borrow a car, you need someone to pick you up from somewhere, you need a last-minute babysitter who lives near you...?

<sup>56</sup> I quote him at length here, because what is said is so foundational and true to the house church idea– even though that is not the context of this author's book. Strangely enough, he is talking about evangelism, about seeing yourself as a missionary to your friends and

“This new community of transformed people, called the Church, should be patterned after the one true God, who eternally exists as a Trinitarian community of Father, Son, and Spirit. God made men and women in His image and likeness, which means, in part, that we too were made for friendships and community. It explains why God told our father Adam that it was not good for him to be alone, though at the time both he and his environment were perfect. God made Eve to be in friendship, marriage covenant, and community together with Adam. But they were soon separated by their sin, which came between them. Since our first parents, we have all been born into a world in which we long for gracious, joyous, and endless friendship and community but find this longing unsatisfied because of the sin that separates us from friendship with God and one another.

“In his book *Bowling Alone*, Harvard professor Robert Putnam explains this phenomenon by showing that our world is arranged by various sorts of capital. *Physical capital* includes the objects that we possess and use. *Human capital* includes the skills, talents, and abilities that God has given people. *Social capital* includes the friends, acquaintances, coworkers, family members, and other relationships that form a web of trust and reciprocity.

“Traditionally, people have lived their lives in these capital networks by formally and informally bartering goods, services, information, favors, and the like. Basically, this means that I do something nice to help you because we have some type of relationship, with the understanding that, later on, you will help me when I need it, because I’ve made a deposit into our invisible social-capital account.

“Traditionally, the largest repository of social capital has been the church. Roughly half of all membership in organizations, charitable giving, and community service is connected to religious organizations, making them the number-one repository of social friendships and connecting opportunities in our nation. But, as spirituality has become more of a private affair, the percentage of the population that attends Protestant churches has declined from 15 percent to 12 percent in just the last quarter century.<sup>57</sup> Correspondingly, in the past twenty-five years, there has been a decline in both the number of friendships and the number of organizations that people typically join to build friendships— everything from labor unions to professional associations and civic groups. In addition, between 1970 and 1999, the divorce rate has tripled, the teen suicide rate has tripled, and depression has become more prevalent, which has contributed to a disconnected culture of loneliness.

“The decline in our nation’s social capital inevitably reduces all of life to a transaction-based culture in which the only way you can get anyone to help you is to

---

neighbors, much like we’re suggesting the house churches should do.

<sup>57</sup> Interestingly enough, the mainline churches, which held about 40% of all worshipers on any given weekend just a decade ago, now house about 16% on any given weekend.

pay them. So if you are lonely and want someone to speak to, you may have to pay a counselor. If you can't pick up your dry cleaning, you may have to hire a personal assistant. If you want to work out with someone, you may have to call a cab— rather than a neighbor— to pick you up.

“Many people are lonely and lack the community gathering points in which they can make meaningful human contacts. The following statistics demonstrate this altering of our relational landscape in the past twenty-five years.

- Playing cards as a social activity is down 25 percent.
- Frequenting bars, nightclubs, and taverns is down 40 percent.
- The number of full-service restaurants has decreased 25 percent, and the number of bars (including coffee bars) and luncheonettes has decreased 50 percent, but the number of fast food outlets has increased 100 percent, as more people eat alone and eat more meals in their cars.
- Having a social evening with someone from one's neighborhood is down 33 percent.
- Attending social clubs and meetings is down 58 percent.
- Family dinners are down 33 percent.
- Having friends over to one's home is down 45 percent.
- From 1980 to 1993, participation in America's number one participant sport, bowling, was up 10 percent, but the number of bowling leagues decreased 40 percent, as more people bowled alone.
- From 1985 to 1999, the readiness of the average American to make new friends declined by nearly 33 percent.

“People are increasingly busy, isolated, lonely, disconnected, and without any helpful solutions in the culture. The isolation is now so entrenched that many people don't know how to practice hospitality. This trend is even reflected in new architecture, which replaces large dining and living rooms designed for human contact with walk-in closets, home offices, and personal entertainment rooms. Here lonely people can watch sitcoms about friendships and reality-based show in which characters pretend to interact with human beings, a thing apparently fascinating and foreign to many lonely, isolated individuals.

“Living alone, driving alone, eating alone, sleeping alone, having sex alone, and working alone make many people so depressed that they cope with the assistance of medication rather than human contact. Some, however, seek out human connection through groups, as 40 percent of all Americans are now in some form of group (Sunday schools, support groups, writing groups, self-improvement groups,

cause-oriented groups, therapy groups, civic-betterment groups, recovery groups, weight-loss groups, literary groups), because they are dying of loneliness, particularly if they are single, and even more so if they are divorced.

“The time, money, and energy spent by previous generations on building friendships and community are increasingly being spent in impersonal pursuits such as pet care and beauty regimens.

- From 1992 to 1999, the amount of time spent caring for a pet increased 15 percent.
- From 1992 to 1999, the amount of time spent for personal grooming increased 5-7 percent.

“Isn’t it odd that we are apparently becoming a nation of attractive people who sit at home alone at night with our pets, watching television shows about relationships and taking medication for the depression brought on by our loneliness? Meanwhile, our neighbors, whom we do not know, are spending their evenings in much the same way.

“*Reformission*<sup>58</sup> requires that in our increasingly individualistic, lonely, and depressed culture, we avoid proclaiming solely a personal relationship with Jesus. The gospel requires us to proclaim and embody the full work of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus has accomplished four things which people long for. First, Jesus takes away the sins that separate us from God so that we can be connected to God, which fills our spiritual longings. Second, Jesus takes away the sins that separate us from each other so that we can be reconciled to each other as the church, which fills our social longings. Third, Jesus forgives the sins we have committed, thereby cleansing us of our filth, which fills our emotional longing for forgiveness. Fourth, Jesus cleanses our defilement that has come upon us through the sins of others, which fulfills our psychological longing for healing, cleansing, and new life...”<sup>59</sup>

*Our relationship with each other is the criterion the world uses to judge whether our message is truthful. Christian community is the final apologetic.*<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> *Reformission* is this author’s term for “reforming missions” from an “over there,” over seas look at evangelism and missions to a right here, right now approach— and from a seeing professional clergy as missionaries to seeing each Christian as a missionary. It is Biblical— and it is important, when you consider that America is now the fourth largest mission field in the world, and that we receive more missionaries here than we are sending to other countries, as of the last count.

<sup>59</sup> From Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformission: Reaching Out Without Selling Out*, pp78-82.

<sup>60</sup> Francis Schaeffer.

*While earlier generations of Americans were permanent residents attached to a place, we are nomads, perpetual immigrants condemned to move from place to place in our own country.<sup>61</sup>*

*If people don't need each other, they will spend little time together telling stories to each other, and if they don't know one another's stories, how can they know whether or not to trust one another?<sup>62</sup>*

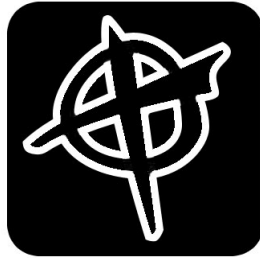
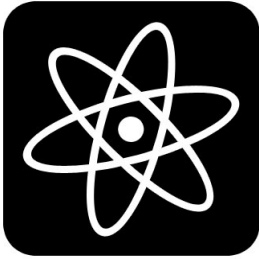
*The mission of the church cannot be accomplished apart from Christian community<sup>63</sup>*

---

<sup>61</sup>David Wells, in "The Price of Modern Restlessness."

<sup>62</sup>Wendell Berry

<sup>63</sup>Randy Frazee, in *The Connecting Church*. Frazee's book is perhaps one of the best reads on this subject. His book is, in a real sense, foundational to what we are seeking to do here. Much of the ideas in the second half of this chapter, particularly, build open his work.



**P  
t  
Oth  
Use  
Inf**

**ar  
2  
er  
ful  
or**

**mation**



