

Chapter Nine

Housechurches: A Simple Model Whose Time has Come

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In our day and age where complex mega church models seem to be having a significant effect on the Kingdom, it is difficult for many to comprehend that there is another model of church that not only is biblical, but viable, while being small, simple, and effective.

The Model is Housechurch—The Simple Church.

Some may dismiss this model immediately, citing historic anecdotal failures. Instances of schismatic behavior, lack of accountability and theological training, and even a tendency toward cult-like isolation has indeed marked some of the housechurch's past. However, church history also shows vibrant, biblically committed housechurch communities in virtually every century since Constantine's revolution.

In the next few pages we will suggest that not only is the vast majority of the modern housechurch movement in Canada, and beyond, nothing like its detractor's caricatures, but rather a broadly strategic, biblical, viable model of growing the Kingdom of God.

Much has been written on post-modern, post-Christian behavior. The way people perceive denominations and church institutions has undergone a major shift, and while there seems to be a renewed spiritual interest worldwide, there is unequalled abandoning of traditional models of actualizing those interests.

It is not the purpose of this chapter to do justice to an understanding of these trends—many scholarly books have done that—but rather, to suggest that one particularly effective model of addressing these societal realities lies in the strategic evangelistic/discipling model known as housechurch. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in many parts of the

world, in diverse cultural and political contexts, God is on the move—utilizing the simple model of housechurch.

The next few pages are not intended to be a full theological/sociological treatise of housechurch, but simply to stimulate interest in a model that we believe vital to winning our nation to a radical commitment to Jesus Christ.

While the authors believe the model best to achieve this goal, we simultaneously affirm:

- 1) There are many models of church effectively advancing the Kingdom. It is therefore our desire to foster a positive relationship with all forms and models of the Church of Jesus Christ.
- 2) There is no room for a bitter, critical, or isolationist spirit in the advancing of Christ's Church. It is precisely for this reason that Canadian Housechurch Network (CHCN) was established with the support of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC).

In the following section, Dr. Zdero responds to the foundational question, "How is housechurch a biblically sound model of church?"

Dogs, Tails, and the Church

Have you ever seen a dog wag its tail? All of us have. The dog does it with ease, effectiveness, and enjoyment. Why? Because it's the most natural thing in the world for a dog to do; it was designed that way. But, what would happen if one day the tail began to wag the dog instead? The movements would be awkward, difficult, and maybe even painful after a while. Why? Because it's not the way the dog and tail were meant to work together. This illustration provides a humorous yet important insight for the Christian church: *function* must always determine *form*. In other words, there is a God-given *mandate* to the Church that, in turn, determines the particular *method* that helps bring it into reality.

Unfortunately, what much of the Church has been doing for the past 1,700 years is a reversal of this order, resulting in the unnecessary complexity and relative ineffectiveness of the "cathedral" model of church. It is characterized by the three cardinal myths of a special man running a special service in a special building. It is imperative, then, for those of us passionate about making disciples of all nations in this day and age to rediscover a more effective and biblical model that places *function* and *form* in the proper alignment. Who better to turn to for such advice than the first century church?

Function and Form in the Early Church

Specifically, this section briefly outlines five key functions – often occurring sequentially – characteristic of the early Christian movement and the particular form they used to carry them out (Function → Form):

- Initiate → Apostles
- Integrate → Housechurches
- Involve → Participatory Meetings
- Instruct → Elders
- Interconnect → The Citywide Church.
- Initiate → Apostles

Initiate → Apostles

Function – Initiate. The early Church recognized that the world desperately needed to know and experience reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). But, they knew they needed to take the initiative and invite people into this relationship; the world was not going to come knocking at the door of the church begging to find out what the fuss was all about. The Lord himself made this clear by telling his first generation of followers to go in to the world, make disciples, baptize converts, and teach them to follow Christ (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

Form – Apostles. The early Church had a select group of firebrands with clear calling, competence, and character who were traveling Christian workers known as “apostles” (Greek = *apostolos*, meaning “sent one” or “messenger”). Those with apostolic callings, in particular, felt the urgency and importance of carrying out the Gospel mandate personally (Acts 13:1-3, 1 Cor 9:16-17, 1 Tim 2:7). Their role was mobile, temporary, and universal, and they usually worked in small bands of two or three. The apostles Peter and Paul both used the approach that was initiated by Jesus in training apostolic workers, namely the “man of peace” strategy (Luke 10:1-11). This would typically involve finding some sort of contact point in an area unreached by the Gospel and invite non-Christians to consider Christ through public proclamation (Acts 17:2-5, 16-28), private conversation (Acts 10:1-48, 16:9-15, 25-34), and power encounters (Acts 19:8-12, 28:1-10). Those who responded to their message would form the nucleus of a new self-sustaining discipling community. Apostolic bands also provided future coaching to these groups when necessary through personal visits and letters (Acts 15:36, 20:17-20).

Integrate → Housechurches

Function – Integrate. The early Church was convinced that all believers—new and old—needed to be integrated into a community with others of like mind in order to keep going strong in their faith (Heb 10:25). Discipling happens best when done in the context of a cluster of people working together, encouraging one another, and keeping each other accountable. They employed group metaphors like the “household of God” (Eph 2:19, 1 Pet 4:17), “living stones” that formed a spiritual temple (1 Pet 2:5), and the “Body of Christ” (Rom 12:4-5). The most common word they used to speak of believers clustering together was the word “church” (Greek = *ekklesia*), which literally means “assembly” or “meeting.”

Form – Housechurches. To integrate people into community, the apostles gathered folks together in the most natural setting possible, namely people’s homes. Why? Housechurches are simple, small, inexpensive, adaptable, duplicatable, and strongly affirm the family nature of church life. Christians were one of the few religious groups at the time that did not construct special religious buildings. As such, these ordinary home churches were the dominant way Believers met in the first century and were spread across the vastness of the Roman Empire from east to west in cities like Jerusalem, Colossae, Corinth, Philippi, and even Rome itself (Acts 2:46, 5:42, 8:3, 16:14-15, 29-34, 18:4-8, 20:20, Rom 16:3-5, 1 Cor 16:19, Col 4:15, Philem 1:2).

Involve → Participatory Meetings

Function – Involve. The first Christians believed that every follower of Christ had a contribution to make to others. They affirmed the fact that every Believer had spiritual gifts (i.e., skills, talents, capacities, experiences, and Spirit-led promptings) that were

actually given and/or honed by God to benefit the Christian community as a whole. They expressed this conviction using the metaphor of the “Body of Christ,” with its interlocking relationships and the mutual ministry between individuals (Rom 7:4, 1 Cor 10:16-17, 12:4-30, Eph 4:11).

Form – Participatory Meetings. To practically implement this equal opportunity theology, church meetings were participatory. No one-man shows. No select few performing for the passive many. Everyone had the opportunity and responsibility of bringing their spiritual contribution to the “common table” (1 Cor 14:26, Eph 5:19-20, Col 3:16, Heb 10:25). After a prolonged discussion on the purpose and nature of church meetings, Paul states: “*What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the Church*” (1 Cor 14:26 [NIV]; our emphasis). To visibly symbolize the Church’s communal and contributory nature, housechurches would regularly share the Lord’s Supper as a full meal (Luke 22:14-20; 1 Cor 11:17-34).

Instruct → Elders

Function – Instruct. Once apostolic workers established a functioning discipling community, the bulk of their job was done because of their mobile and temporary role in the early Church. However, they were very concerned that individuals and housechurches would be instructed properly to be as healthy and vibrant as possible in the long run, both theologically and morally (Acts 15:36, 20:28-32, 2 Cor 11:28). There needed to be ongoing care and direction given to the housechurches.

Form – Elders. To achieve this aim, mobile apostles typically appointed a small team of elders in each Christian group to provide long-term care and supervision of the housechurches (Acts 14:23, 20:17-28, 21:18, 1 Tim 4:14, 5:17, Titus 1:5-11, James 5:14). They were not part of a first century clergy system, but were ordinary folks who spiritually parented and led ordinary housechurches. Elders acted as the primary, but not the only, shepherds who cared for people, gave instruction, and embodied Christian lifestyle (1 Thess 5:12-13). However, they were also strategists who gave direction to the church at critical decision-making points (Acts 15:2-6, 22).

Interconnect → The Citywide Church

Function – Interconnect. A theology of unity and oneness pervaded the mindset of the first Christians. They believed they were to be interconnected with each other. The most powerful image they invoked was that of the “Body of Christ,” which was comprised of a diversity of individual members yet was united (Rom 12:4-5, 1 Cor 10:16-17, 12:12-27, Eph 1:22-23, 4:4-5). Any hint of division between Christians was tantamount to dividing up Christ himself (1 Cor 1:10-13).

Form – The Citywide Church. The practical outworking of this theology of unity on a local level was working together and doing life as one citywide church. In their letters, the apostles never addressed the “churches” in a given locale, but rather the “church” of this or that city (Acts 8:1, 11:26, 1 Cor 1:2, 2 Cor 1:1, 1 Thess 1:1, 2 Thess 1:1). As such, the only reason for separation between Christians in the first century was geographical distance. Consequently, the church in each city—which was comprised of a network of housechurches—was held together locally by three strands (Acts 15:22-36, 20:17-21, Titus 1:5): A team of elders who provided mentoring and management.

House-to-house meeting patterns.

Occasional citywide gatherings that involved all housechurches, especially when apostolic teams would visit. Creating wider multi-city regional movements was also fostered by traveling apostolic bands through personal visits and letters (Acts 14:23, 15:36, Col 4:16).

We have examined the first century church to discover a critical lesson for us today: They minimized the complexity of their *forms* in order to maximize the effectiveness of their *functions*. They knew nothing about a professional clergy system, special religious buildings, highly polished worship services, or the expensive programs that define today's complex "cathedral" Christianity. Instead, they kept organization to a bare minimum as a housechurch movement so they could focus on what they were really about, namely, making disciples of Christ. Are we willing to take a risk and follow their lead?

Why is the Housechurch an Effective Way of Growing the Kingdom?

First and foremost, it is easily reproducible. The housechurch is simple in its organizational structure and therefore requires less expertise in leadership gifting in order to multiply. Neil Cole, in *Cultivating a Life for God*, says, "simplicity is the key to the fulfillment of the great commission in this generation.... The more complex the process, the greater the giftedness needed to keep it going."

The very nature of housechurch is organic. Since care is given to remain organic—not falling into an organizational mode—the leadership crisis is solved. There's no need for a highly skilled organizational strategist, Masters level theologian, pulpiteer, or even a group psychologist. All that is needed is an authentic, anointed, gifted leader who understands what it means to be a fully committed follower of Jesus Christ.

In contrast, starting a traditional model church requires all of these things as well as being a master of marketing, possessing business acumen, high-vision capacity, as well as being entrepreneurially inclined. The housechurch is easily reproducible because a leader can effectively mentor another leader within the group such that he or she could begin another group within a short period of time.

The housechurch is effective in growing the Kingdom because it is seeker friendly. Most everyone feels accepted and cared for when invited for a meal. The environment is conducive to relational interaction. Most people are not intimidated in this setting because it isn't foreign to their experience. The proverbial "fish" is no longer required to jump into the boat and feel comfortable.

The housechurch is effective because it is discipleship ready. When a person leads their neighbour to Christ it is a natural step to invite them into the home for a meal and to meet with other Believers. The new Believer very quickly understands that the nature of the church is the Body of Christ—people caring for one another in a relational intimate setting. They now belong to a family where there are spiritual fathers and mothers, not teachers, programs, and religious protocol. They begin to understand very quickly that being a Christian is not simply adhering to a set of beliefs, but rather a relationship—with God and with others.

The housechurch is effective in building the Kingdom because it is flexible. It is simple and it is small and can therefore adapt easily to significant sociological changes.

The economic realities of new church buildings and highly skilled educated pastoral staff may, in the not too distant future, force us all into the housechurch model. Believers' tithes and offerings can be used almost exclusively for ministry and multiplication.

A theology of "place" or the use of a building is not heretical, nor are houses an instant cure; however, the practical stewardship of time, energy, and finances toward evangelism and discipleship away from brick and mortar should cause us to re-evaluate traditional practices.

Finally, the housechurch is an effective way of growing the Kingdom simply because you can begin right now in your own living room. There's no need to go off to seminary, uproot your family, rent a gym, go in debt building an edifice, or phone 10,000 people. Simply invite some friends over for a meal, prayer, meaningful conversation, and study of God's Word. Instant church—a body of Believers "doing life" together.

Millions of Christians across North America and around the world are keenly aware that God is on the move toward massive change in His Church. Despite the best in seminars, books, programs, dynamic speakers and leaders, and vast resources, the Church has essentially lost North America to religious ideals at best. The Spirit of God may well be unleashing the reformation of ecclesiology worldwide. The religious system adopted since Constantine in the fourth century has essentially gone unchanged, even despite a theological reformation in the 1400s. Wolfgang Simson put it succinctly, "the Free-Churches freed the system from the state, the Baptists then baptized it, the Quakers dry-cleaned it, the Salvation Army put it in uniform, the Pentecostals anointed it and the Charismatics renewed it, but until today nobody has really changed the system."

For many of us, the way we "do" church is no longer acceptable. It's time to "be" the church.

The Canadian Housechurch Network (CHCN)

Responding to this growing worldwide movement which has recently been awakened in Canada, the EFC made arrangements for an exploratory Canadian housechurch regional leader's consultation in June 2002. Approximately 20 housechurch networkers from across Canada participated in exploring means of maximizing the contribution of the housechurch model through national cooperative efforts, resource sharing, and encouraging "best practices." EFC's National Evangelism Partnerships coordinator, Murray Moerman, facilitated the historic event.

The event was made even more historic by the degree of consensus reached by those attending regarding the core values (DNA) of biblical housechurch.

It was agreed that the basic core values of a biblically functioning housechurch would include:

- A commitment to truth as revelation through Jesus and Scriptures.
- A commitment to an understanding of Gospel that is fundamentally relational, nurturing, and familial.
- A commitment to understanding that every church is apostolic (sent out) and missional (on a strategic path).

CHCN is not an attempt to form an organization, but rather a voluntary informal networking partnership between housechurch developers and strategists. More information is available at www.housechurchcanada.ca.

A servant-leadership team was assembled by consensus at the conclusion of the consultation with representatives, at the time of this publication, being:

- British Columbia - Rich Finlay
- Prairie Provinces - Ken Stade
- Ontario - Jerry Steingard
- Quebec
- Maritimes
- National Coordinator - Ken Stade
- Resource Coordinator - Grace Wiebe

Our Vision

To encourage the development and sustenance of housechurch networks in Canada through the coordination of regional housechurch conferences and leadership development events, resources, and ongoing dialogue regarding core values.

Our Mission

To facilitate relationship among housechurch networks; coordination and communication of resources through the CHCN website coordination of national and regional special events and conferences; coordinate prayer for housechurch on a national level; represent the national housechurch movement in Canada of the EFC.

Our Goals

- To give immediate representation at the EFC level.
- To establish a leadership team with representatives from the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairie Provinces, and British Columbia.
- To coordinate regional housechurch conferences.
- To provide Net-accessible housechurch resource network.
- To foster a positive relationship with all forms and models of the Church of Jesus Christ.
- To gather together national Canadian housechurch network leaders on an annual basis for the purpose of mutual support and addressing issues surrounding the housechurch in Canada.
- To establish a housechurch registry.
- To establish identity and legitimacy of the housechurch in Canada.
- To encourage the equipping of housechurch leadership.
- To educate through consensus the core values (DNA) of biblical housechurch.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Do you think networking housechurches is important? If so, why?
2. How has a close spiritual community been important to you?

3. What is your response to the statement “the history of the Christian church is in many ways the story of the struggle between the prophetic and institutional religion.” Is this applicable today?
4. What circumstances on your city or personal life led you to believe it is possible to see a housechurch movement “take off ” in your area?
5. What problems or pitfalls do you think housechurches need to be aware of?
6. What problems or pitfalls do you think the CHCN needs to be aware of?
7. In your opinion, do denominations have a role in propelling the housechurch movement forward?
8. What are the disadvantages and/or advantages of trying to work within the traditional structures to start housechurches?

RECOMMENDED READING:

Dr. Rad Zdero , The Housechurch Manifesto, rad@housechurch.ca

Larry Kreider, House Church Networks, www.dcfi.org

Wolfgang Simons, Houses that change the World, WolfSimson@compuserve.com

Bob Fitts, The Church in the House, BobFitts@compuserve.com

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Dr. Ken Stade is the executive director of The Seminary of Urban Ministry (SUM) in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. He also gives direction to The Kingsfold communities—a new housechurch network in Winnipeg. He is married to Val Stade. They have three grown children. Email: kenstade@shaw.ca

Dr. Rad Zdero is a housechurch network developer and leader in the Toronto area. He has written a helpful book, *The Housechurch Manifesto*, and has agreed to contribute to this chapter. Email: rad@housechurch.c

