

# THE HOUSE CHURCH

## THE CASE FOR HOUSE CHURCHES

**By Bob Fitts, Sr.**

*“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus... Greet also the church that meets at their house (Rom 16:3-5).*

*“The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house” (1Cor 16:19).*

*“Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house” (Col 4:15).*

*“To Philemon, our dear friend... and to the church that meets in your home...” (Philem 1,2).*

From the above scriptures it is clear that the early church met in houses. They were not what we might call a “church house.” They were houses that people lived in, and opened up as a meeting place for the church.

The early church did not have church buildings. Such buildings did not appear until the year 232 A.D. The most explosive period of church growth in history, until recently, took place during those early years when there were no church buildings.

However, right now, in China, there is an unusual move of the Spirit of God that is even greater than that early growth. This is happening without the use of church buildings. This revival is a house church movement.

The following excerpt is taken from the Caleb Report in the 1990 Jan./Feb. issue of MINISTRIES MAGAZINE. The report is given by Loren Cunningham, founder and president of YOUTH WITH A MISSION:

“According to the U.S. Center For World Mission, more than 22,000 Chinese are coming to Christ each day. That is the equivalent of seven days of Pentecost every 24 hours. It is happening right now. Most of this explosion of

new belief is coming from China's rural communities, where 80% of the population of China lives.

“Jonathan Chao, founder of the Chinese Church Research Center, told me how the Chinese revival is being spread by young people. They are mostly ages 15 to 19. The teenagers go to villages and share the gospel where it has never been heard before.

“As converts are organized into small groups, the teens call for the `elders' (believers in their twenties) to come and teach the newly formed home church. At the same time the teenagers go on to reach the next village.

“Chinese pastors and teachers do not have financial barriers to spreading the Christian message. They live with the peasant farmers in each new area, and do not construct buildings. They have very little and need very little.

“By this simple means, the good news is leaping across the fields and mountains of China.”

The explosive church growth that is now going on in China has something in common with the growth in the early Church in the book of Acts. They were both a house church movement. This same kind of growth is seen in other countries today where church buildings are not allowed.

There is a simple principle expressed here: The more obstacles that we allow to hinder the planting of new churches, the more growth we will see.

I have had experience in both planting and pastoring house churches. I see some definite advantages to house church planting for church multiplication:

## **HOUSE CHURCHES ARE EASY TO START**

To plant a house church you do not need to buy property or build a building. You will not need a pulpit, pews, hymn books or a piano. You can do without a baptistry, a Sunday School and a youth pastor.

You will not have to belong to a denomination or be incorporated. You will not have to meet on Sundays, have a church bulletin or meet in the same place every week.

You will not have to have a sign with the name of your church on it. It will not need a name. In fact, you do not even have to call it a “church” as long as you know that it is a church.

None of the above are bad or wrong, but neither are they necessary. The Apostle Paul used none of the above in his church planting ministry.

Many of our modern churches have left the simplicity of the New Testament and added so many extras, which are really not needed. Therefore, it has become more and more difficult to start a new church.

You cannot go to any country today where the Apostle Paul planted churches and point to a building and say, “There is the church of Corinth!” or “Look at that lovely building! That is the church of the Ephesians!” or “Here is the church of the Thessalonians!” There are no such buildings. So far as we know, the churches that Paul planted met in houses.

Ray Williams, a close personal friend, has been a missionary in Mexico for 25 years. He has been used of God to plant scores of churches in Mexico out of which hundreds of churches have been birthed.

He told me recently that he once started a church in a wheat field. That church has grown large. Out of it have come a multitude of “daughter and granddaughter churches,” each with a church planting vision.

We tend to make our churches too complex. God is calling us back to simplicity and ease of multiplication.

## **HOUSE CHURCH IS RELAXED AND INFORMAL**

Several years ago I took my family to a church where the pastor was an outstanding Bible teacher. I loved the church and wanted to continue to attend. However, everyone there dressed in a style that my family could not afford.

Some people do not come to certain churches today because those churches have set the standard of dress too high. They have made church a “formal” event. Many who will not attend a formal type of church will attend a house church because it is more relaxed. It has a casual, family atmosphere.

In his book, *UNDERSTANDING CHURCH GROWTH*, Dr. Donald McGavran lists “Eight Keys To Church Growth In Cities”. The very first one gives us Dr. McGavran’s idea of the importance of planting and multiplying house churches. He states:

“The eight keys I am about to mention are not mere guesses. They describe principles on which church growth men agree.

“First, emphasize house churches. When the Church begins to grow, each congregation must soon find a place to assemble.

“The congregation should meet in the most natural surroundings. It should be a place where non-Christians can come with the greatest ease. It should encourage the converts themselves to carry on the services. Obtaining a place to assemble should not lay a financial burden on the little congregation.

“The house church meets all these requirements ideally. House churches should always be considered, both for initial planting and for later extension.”

## **HOUSE CHURCHES ARE EVANGELISTIC TOOLS**

Dr. Peter Wagner is considered by many to be the foremost authority on church growth today. He says, “The best method under heaven for evangelism is church planting. There never was a better method and there never will be.”

*SATURATION CHURCH PLANTING* is the name given to the vision now being adopted by mission leaders worldwide.

A church that divides in order to multiply will experience addition. A church that has its focus only on addition will tend to bog down and stagnate.

The goal of many church leaders has been to try to make one very large congregation, rather than to multiply congregations. However, the church in any city will increase much more rapidly by multiplying congregations than it will by seeking to build one super congregation.

The largest church in the world is in Seoul, Korea, under the pastoral leadership of Dr. Yonggi Cho, who has applied this principle of multiplication. His church is evangelizing the city of Seoul in a remarkable way by multiplying

congregations. These are called “cell groups.” They were willing to divide in order to multiply, and the addition has been incredible.

## **HOUSE CHURCHES FACILITATE TRAINING OF PASTORS AND LEADERS**

Educators have understood for a long time that the best method of training is still the apprentice method. This is “one on one, hands on” training. It is what a blacksmith, plumber or lawyer would have received a hundred years ago. They learned by observing and doing while being accountable to a master in the trade.

This was Jesus’ method. His disciples learned by watching, listening and doing while they lived their lives with the master teacher Himself.

In house churches pastors can be trained to actually do the work of pastoring. At the same time they will be under the supervision of a senior pastor. They will grow as the church grows under their leadership.

Those pastors who have full-time paying jobs could continue to work until the church is able to support a pastor. Some will pastor more than one house church since they will not all meet on Sunday morning.

## **HOUSE CHURCHES HELP BOND RELATIONSHIPS**

A small house church makes it much more likely that the very shy will find their identity within the body of Christ.

In our house church we usually had our noon meal together on Sundays. Each family would take part in preparing and serving the meal. The forming of relationships occurs much more easily in such “household” situations.

In his periodic Church Growth Report, Win Arn makes the following statement under the caption A PROVEN GROWTH PRINCIPLE:

**EFFECTIVE SMALL GROUPS:** “In our study of growing churches, we have found that one common characteristic is the high degree of relational ‘glue’ among members. Call it ‘love,’ ‘friendship,’ ‘caring’... it is what genuinely attracts and holds members.”

## HOUSE CHURCHES ARE ECONOMICAL

A house church will be able to channel almost all of its finances into ministry. Since the meetings will be held in houses, all building expenses will be avoided. In this way, only ten tithing families could support a full-time pastor.

Since one pastor could oversee more than one house church, he does not have to receive all his support from one congregation. Meetings can be held on other days or nights as well as Sundays. I heard of one pastor who was regularly conducting 12 house meetings each week.

Nothing in the New Testament says that Sunday at 11 a.m. is the hour for church. As a matter of fact, the pattern in the Book of Acts is that they met daily. The first day of the week is seldom mentioned at all, and never is it emphasized as a special day set aside for worship.

Of course many of these house churches will be led by pastors- in-training. These people will have regular jobs and will pastor a house church as time permits.

The honor of a livable income should go to those who are giving full-time to the work. However, even those who serve part-time as pastors should also receive similar honor. They should be given some love gifts and remuneration from tithes and offerings. This would offset their expenses and encourage them in the work of the ministry. Whether part-time or full-time, *“the workman is worthy of his hire”* (Luke 10:7).

## HOUSE CHURCHES CAN SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF GROWTH

Some of our congregations have grown so large that they have to build bigger buildings, rent more space or go to two services. This is what we call a “happy problem.”

There is also a happy solution. Begin to train pastors by assigning them an area of the city. Then give them a few families to start a house church in that section of the city for the purpose of “having a baby.”

The most life-giving thing a church can do is to have a baby. I have seen too many churches die because of a spirit of possessiveness in the leadership.

The churches that God is blessing are those who continually give away everything that God gives them.

Jesus said, *“Give and it shall be given to you”* (Luke 6:38). A giving church is a growing church.

Michael Green is the principal of St. John’s College of Nottingham, England. In his address before the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1974, he spoke on Methods and Strategy in the Evangelism of the Early Church. He said: “In the early church, buildings were unimportant; They did not have any during the period of their greatest advance.

“Today buildings seem all-important to many Christians. Their upkeep consumes the money and interest of the members. This often plunges the people into debt, and isolates them from those who do not go to church.

“In some cases, even the word ‘church has changed its meaning. It no longer means a company of people, as it did in New Testament times. These days ‘church’ incorrectly often means a building.”

There are many advantages to house churches. The most important is that of simplicity and ease of multiplication.

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# THE HOUSE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

During Jesus' lifetime common, ordinary dwellings were used for spreading the gospel and for discipling new converts. This was also true during the expansion of the Church in the Book of Acts. The scripture passages below show this.

## A HOUSE WHERE JESUS WORSHIPPED

*“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and myrrh” (Matt 2:11).*

The very first time a group gathered to worship Jesus and offer Him gifts was in a house. This was the house of Mary and Joseph.

## PETER'S HOUSE IS USED FOR A HEALING MEETING

*“When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in a bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him and he drove out the spirits and healed all their sick” (Matt 8:14-16).*

In the early days of His ministry, Jesus used the house of Peter to conduct preaching, healing and deliverance meetings.

## THE FIRST COMMUNION SERVICE IS HELD IN A HOUSE

*“In the last week of Jesus' ministry he said to his disciples, ‘Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, The teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house’” (Matt 26:18).*

Our Lord could have chosen to celebrate the first communion with His disciples in a synagogue, in the temple, or in some other place of religious importance. However, He chose to celebrate it in a common, ordinary house.

Thus He set His approval on the common dwelling place as a holy and sanctified place. It was worthy of the most solemn worship services.

## **JESUS PREACHED TO CROWDS ASSEMBLED IN HOUSES**

*“Several days later he returned to Capernaum, and the news of his arrival spread quickly through the city. Soon the house where he was staying was so packed with visitors that there wasn’t room for a single person more, not even outside the door. And he preached the word to them” (Mark 2:1,2 tlb).*

Jesus did the same things in houses that we do in our church buildings today. He also did these things in the open air, and in the temple courtyard.

## **PENTECOST CAME TO A HOUSE CHURCH**

*“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting...”(Acts 2:1,2).*

Many of us have never considered the number of foundational, biblical events that took place in someone’s house.

### **BULLETS:**

- The first worship service happened in a house.
- The first communion service was in a house.
- The first healing service was conducted in a house.
- The first instance of the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles came about in the house of Cornelius.
- The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was in a house, and —

– The first churches that the Apostle Paul planted were all organized in houses.

Over the centuries we have lost the life that can be found in simplicity. Instead we have added things that have slowed the progress of the Church's spreading into all nations.

## **IN THE STREETS AND IN THE HOUSES**

*“They worshipped together regularly at the temple each day, met in small groups in homes for communion and shared their meals with great joy and thankfulness” (Acts 2:46 tlb).*

The early Church not only met in small groups in homes, but also in larger gatherings in public places. The most rapid growth of the Church has been when it was not using formal meeting places. Throughout history the Church grew the most rapidly when it remained flexible, mobile and militant.

## **SAUL, THE PERSECUTOR, ATTACKS THE HOUSE CHURCHES**

Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house he dragged off believers and put them in prison.

*“But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house: and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison (Acts 8:3).*

Where did Saul of Tarsus go to find “the people of the way” in order to drag them to prison and to death? He found them meeting in houses. He himself would later plant churches in houses on his missionary journeys.

## **WHERE DO YOU ASSEMBLE?**

*“Day after day in the temple courts and from house to house they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the news that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:42).*

The believers did not meet in the temple itself, but rather on the temple grounds, or near the temple where the people were gathered. These were open air meetings.

*THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY* by Lion states that Christians had no special buildings but met in private houses:

“Justin Martyr (100-165 A.D.) was asked by Rusticus the Perfect: ‘Where do you assemble?’ Justin said, ‘where each one chooses and can, or do you fancy that we all meet in the very same place? Not so, because the God of the Christians is not circumscribed (bound in) by place.’”

In his book, *CELLS FOR LIFE*, Ron Trudinger says:

“They initiated the practice of meeting daily in the temple and of breaking of bread from house to house. This last phrase can also be rendered: ‘In the various private homes.’

“Opposition from the Jews soon prevented the use of the temple by Christians. Synagogues were used for awhile, but it was not long before many of these were closed to Christians (see Acts 19). However, we continue to find many references in Acts and the Epistles to churches in homes.”

## **THE HOUSE CHURCH THAT OPENED THE GOSPEL TO THE NATIONS**

*“The following day Peter arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence.... Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people” (Acts 10:24-27).*

This is a good example of how to start a house church. Someone who is hungry for God calls together a number of his family and friends. Then he (or she) calls for the man of God to come and share the Word of God. So simple!

This meeting in the house of Cornelius was an historic breakthrough. It convinced the Jewish believers that the Good News was for all nations, and not just for the Jews.

## **LYDIA’S HOUSE WAS EUROPE’S FIRST CHURCH**

*“After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house where they met with the brothers and encouraged them” (Acts 16:40).*

The church of Philippi was formed in the house of Lydia. The book of Acts does not tell how the church grew. Most likely, when the group could no longer fit in Lydia’s house, the people formed another house church somewhere in the city. In this way they continued to divide and multiply.

## **PAUL’S RENTED HOUSE**

*“For two whole years Paul stayed in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:30,31).*

These final words in the Book of Acts reveal that in Rome Paul used his own rented house for spreading the good news of God’s love.

The fastest growing movement in the world today began in houses. The Christian movement had its greatest growth while its people remained fluid and mobile. Christians multiplied the most when they remained concerned with relationship, not ritual.

## **FROM SHADOW TO SUBSTANCE**

All the types and shadows of the Old Testament were totally fulfilled in Christ. We no longer need the tabernacle, the vestments, the temple, the furniture or any such thing. Christ is all and in all. We are complete in Him.

We no longer need a “holy place” such as the Jews had. We do not need an altar of incense, a laver, shewbread, urim or thummim. We do not need the shadows, for we have the substance — HIS NAME IS JESUS.

Let us look at John 4:20-23, when the woman of Samaria said to Jesus, *“Sir, our fathers worshipped in this mountain: and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.*

*“Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh and now is, when the true worshipers shall*

*worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.”*

Jesus made it clear that, FROM HIS TIME ON Jerusalem was no more holy a place than Samaria. This is because HE HAD COME. In His coming he would forever bring an end to the idea of holy places. This is because He Himself had fulfilled all the types and shadows of the Old Testament.

Let us praise the Lord that we have been released from all bondage concerning a place where we can worship God. Let us rejoice that we are freed from legalism. We are free to worship Him when we are alone or together with others. We are free to worship anytime, day or night, in any place we choose.

## WHAT IS A CHURCH?

A church is certainly not that building down at the corner with the beautiful stained glass windows and the steeple on top. The church may meet there, but that building is not the church.

The original word in Greek, *ekklesia*, is composed of two words: *ek*, meaning, “out from,” and *kalleo*, meaning, “I call.” The full and simple meaning of “church” according to the original Greek word is “I call out from.”

When Jesus said, “*I will build my church,*” He was saying, “I will call my people out of the world. They will assemble in my name, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against them.”

This shows that Jesus’ called-out people will rally as an army. They will take the world for Him. The enemy will not be able to stop the advance. This invincible army will be motivated by the love of God within the hearts of its members. They will have a message of love and forgiveness on their lips.

Actually, *ekklesia* has two meanings: that of being called out, and that of being assembled together. We cannot experience church until we come together.

My wife and I are ONE. We are ONE even when we are separated from each other by many miles. But we do not experience the benefits and blessings of our marriage union until we come together.

In the same way, you and every other believer in your city constitute the church in that city. Even when you are not assembled together you are still the church. But you cannot receive the benefits and blessings of church until you assemble.

To assemble does not mean that you all have to be in the same place at the same time. That will probably never happen in any city.

## **“PEOPLE MOVING TOGETHER”**

John Dawson, in his book, *TAKING OUR CITIES FOR GOD*, says, “There is no absolute model for what a local church should be.

“I once spent an afternoon with over one hundred spiritual leaders from several denominations. We tried to come up with a universal definition of a biblical local church.

“You may think that it was an easy task. However, we became very frustrated.

“Consider all the circumstances of people on the earth. Then examine all the various models of the Church in the Bible. You will now begin to understand our frustration.

“After many hours of discussion, we had produced many good models. However, we found no absolute definition for the Church other than ‘people moving together under the lordship of Jesus.’”

I like the definition “people moving together.” Most of us have been led to believe that the church is a building — standing still.

If God were to shake everything loose until there was nothing left but a simple, basic New Testament church, what would we have left?

Imagine that I take away all the unnecessary things from what I understand church to be. What would remain? It is our purpose in this chapter to answer that question.

First let us examine the word “parachurch.”

## **WHAT IS PARACHURCH?**

Recently I read a book that sought to explain the nature of the church. One title in the book was “What Is the Relationship of the Church to Parachurch Organizations?” The author made the following observation:

“The Bible is clear that it is through the Church that God is going to accomplish His great purpose. However, the Church has not always been what it was supposed to be. For that reason, many believers have become discouraged with the Church. They have seen that the Church, as it is, has not met certain obvious needs.

“Caring and concerned Christians have wanted to meet these pressing needs. For this reason, they have established missionary societies, orphanages, Christian business men’s organizations and other similar institutions.

(Editor’s note: These organizations are often called “parachurch ministries.” The word “parachurch” means “outside the Church,” or “alongside the Church.”)

“As God continues to restore and strengthen His Church, the need for these organizations will diminish. Church fellowships will be ministering to the needs of people everywhere.”

It is obvious in the above quotation that the writer felt strongly that parachurch was not really church at all. It seems he felt that something less than church had come along until the real church could be healed or awakened to do the work it ought to be doing.

This is a classic example of the following idea: “If it doesn’t look like a church it isn’t a church.”

The fact is — When a “parachurch” organization is made up of born-again believers in Jesus who are come together to serve and worship Him, it is not “parachurch,” — it is church!

## **CHURCH IS PEOPLE**

Church is not organization, institution or denomination. It is “people moving together under the lordship of Jesus.”

It would be difficult to find a true “parachurch” organization. Such an organization composed of Christians would not be “parachurch.” It would be CHURCH — GOD’S CALLED-OUT PEOPLE! Even if some members were not born again, it would still be church. What church is there without some unsaved people in attendance?

A few years ago I also had an incorrect idea about parachurch. In my teaching ministry I would often say, “If the church was doing what it ought to be doing, we wouldn’t need all these parachurch organizations.”

It never once occurred to me that these parachurch people were just as much a church as we were, even though the building they met in was not shaped like ours. I did not realize that they were the people of God, moving together under the lordship of Jesus.

Our oldest son has been a member of a well-known “parachurch” organization for many years. This group is doing an outstanding job in missions and evangelism. It is growing very quickly all over the world.

A few years ago my son and I were discussing his future with this particular organization. I shared that I had some negative ideas about the organization because it was not a church, but a “parachurch” organization.

He seemed apologetic, and fully agreed with me. He said that what he and others were doing in that organization was being wonderfully blessed of God. However, he felt that its ministry was still not what God really wanted. This was because it was not happening through a church, but rather through a “parachurch.” (He was also confused about church and parachurch.)

A day or two later I was driving along in my car thinking about my conversation with my son. I felt the Lord gently asking me: “What is it that makes an organization a church?”

As I tried to answer that question, I sensed God gave me a revelation. I had never before seen so clearly as I did in that moment of time.

An organization is not a church because it has a certain shaped building that people call a church.

It is not a church because it has been duly certified by the federal government as a church.

It is not a church because it has been recognized by a denominational headquarters as a church.

It is not a church because it has regular Sunday morning services, and practices baptism and the Lord's Supper.

It is not a church because it meets on a regular basis or in a particular location.

## **IT IS A CHURCH SIMPLY AND ONLY BECAUSE IT IS GOD'S CALLED-OUT PEOPLE MOVING TOGETHER UNDER THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS.**

The author of the book *I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH*, Alfred Kuen wrote: "It is easy to get bogged down with unimportant issues and questions. There does not seem to be a clear-cut way to define a local church.

"When, then, can a body of believers be called a church? I personally tend toward a simple definition: a body of believers can be called a church whenever that group meets together regularly for mutual edification.

"Jesus said, '*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them*' (Matt 18:20 kjv).

"It is clear what Tertullian, one of the early church fathers, felt Jesus meant. Tertullian said, 'Where there are two or three believers, even laymen, there is a church.'"

Jim Montgomery, author of *DAWN 2000: 7 MILLION CHURCHES TO GO*, also addresses the question, "What is a church?" He writes: "I'm impressed with how a group of Christians faced this most fundamental question in China.

"These Chinese believers remarked — 'Many older Christians said that they could not predict the future form of Chinese churches. They turned to the

Bible for an answer. They found there that the house-church form was a legitimate church. Paul mentions a house church in 1 Corinthians 16:19.

“Later, we found a book by Wang Ming-dao. He was perhaps the most highly respected believer in China on the subject of the church. Because of his faith he was put in jail for more than 20 years. He believed that where there were Christians, there was a church.

“We were happy about this. Our group consisted of only a few people. However, we assumed we actually were a church, and our head was Jesus.

“Wang Ming-dao’s statement, ‘Where there are Christians, there is a church,’ is a profound definition. Especially is it profound because it comes from a church growing rapidly and laboring under the most difficult circumstances.”

## **A CONGREGATION OF BELIEVERS IS A CHURCH**

A few months ago I was teaching a small group of believers in the village of La Rumurosa in Old Mexico. I was explaining Matthew 18:20 — *“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am in the midst of them.”*

In Spanish it says, *“Donde hay dos o tres congregados en mi nombre, allí estoy en medio de ellos.”*

One word leaped out at me. I had never noticed it before. It is the Spanish word *congregados* which means “gathered” in English.

“Gathered” means “congregated.” *“Where two or three are CONGREGATED in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”* This reminded me of the English word “congregation.”

I asked the group of Mexican believers, “According to this verse, how many does it take to make a congregation?” As I waited for them to answer, I was struck with the weight of the answer that was forming in my own mind.

Two or three is all it takes to make a congregation — a congregation of believers with Jesus in the midst is a church! This does not mean just any two or three people. It means two or three who are called by Jesus’ name, because they belong to Him.

## JESUS IN THE MIDST

“Jesus within” is the experience of the individual in his own private walk with the Lord. “*Jesus in the midst*” carries the same meaning within a church fellowship.

“*Jesus in the midst*” is Jesus walking among us, touching us, speaking to us through the gifts of the Spirit. It is Jesus flowing through the members of His Body, the Church.

“*Jesus in the midst*” is the corporate experience. “Jesus within” is the private experience.

When two or three true, born-again believers come together in His name, Jesus is IN THE MIDST. Jesus in the midst is CHURCH!

This is a different experience than Jesus within. We cannot experience Jesus in the midst while we are alone. We can only experience Jesus in the midst when we are in company with others — at least one or two others.

Are two or three together a church in the fullest sense of the word? Yes, it is a church in the fullest sense of the word. It is the basic church.

You can have more than two or three and it is still a church, a church in the fullest sense, but it does not become more church because there are more than two or three. It only becomes a bigger church.

## THE ROLE OF CHURCH LEADERS

What about pastors, teachers, apostles, evangelists and prophets? Is it a church without these being present? Yes, it is a church, even without all of the above.

The fourth chapter of Ephesians says that the Lord gave all these five ministries to the church. He gave these gifts to something that was already in existence.

When Paul went out from Antioch on his first missionary journey, he established churches in four cities. On his way back to Antioch, he ordained elders for those churches.

This indicates that the Holy Spirit, Who is the author of the Book of Acts, knew these were churches BEFORE leadership was appointed.

*“And when they had preached the gospel to that city ... they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, “And exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.*

*“And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed” (Acts 14:21-24).*

The elders were chosen out of the disciples who made up the churches. Disciples were people called by God out of darkness into light. These sort of people are THE CHURCH! Notice that the writer of Acts uses the words “disciples” and “church” interchangeably.

Notice also that Paul felt it safe to leave these newly-formed churches in the hands of the Lord on Whom the people had believed. This is a key statement and needs to be more fully understood.

We who are in leadership in the church have sometimes wrongfully placed too much importance on ourselves. We do this when we assume that the church cannot function without our total “watchcare” over the flock.

A bishop, elder or pastor is an overseer and a feeder. He functions as a father or a nurse to his spiritual “children.” However, there needs to be a limit to his spiritual oversight. Many leaders have too often violated this.

The major violation by us as church leaders is that we have almost completely taken the ability to minister away from the people. We have given this ability to the “professional clergy.”

## **WHAT, THEN, IS A CHURCH?**

If we take away all that is not essential in the church, that leaves only what is essential. Then we would have Jesus and at least two people who have come together in His name.

Two people who have been born again, meeting together to acknowledge Jesus' presence, is church at its most basic level. It doesn't matter where or when these two people meet. When they come together to honor Jesus it is still church.

This, of course, does not mean that this essential level is where the Lord wants us to operate all the time. Praise God for larger groups. But let us never lose sight of the basic church. If we do, we will tend to fall back into forms, rituals, ceremonies, religiosity and legalism.

## SATURATION CHURCH PLANTING

The leading supporter for church planting in the twentieth century was the late Dr. Donald McGavran. In DAWN REPORT, Jim Montgomery tells of the following incident:

“During the last months of Mary McGavran’s illness, my wife Lyn would frequently spend time with her. Donald McGavran would be there, too. He would disregard his own painful cancer while taking care of his beloved Mary.

“‘You can be sure Jim and I will continue our commitment to church growth after you are gone,’ Lyn said to Donald one day.

“‘Do not call it church growth anymore,’ was his quick response. ‘Call it church multiplication!’

“Two weeks before his death, he said, ‘The only way we will get the job of the Great Commission done is to plant a church in every community in the world.’”

## THE A.D.2000 AND BEYOND MOVEMENT

The A.D.2000 And Beyond Movement is gaining momentum all over the world. Its objective is to mobilize the Body of Christ to work directly toward fulfilling the Great Commission in our time.

It is a vision that is being adopted by churches, missionary organizations and denominations all over the world. There is more interest today in missions, world evangelization and church planting than ever before in history.

The following chart shows our progress in completing the Great Commission.

### **Non-Christians per Believer**

Ratio = 360 220 69 27 21 11 7 ?

Year = A.D. 100 1000 1500 1900 1950 1970 1990 2000

Dr. Ralph Winter is the founder of the U.S. Center For World Mission. Concerning this chart, he says, "In the last 20 centuries the meek have quietly been inheriting the earth!"

As you study the chart above you will note that nineteen hundred years ago there were 360 unsaved people in the world for every born again believer. This is a ratio of 360 to 1.

By the year 1500 this ratio had been reduced to just 69 to 1. By the beginning of this century the ratio was all the way down to 27 to 1.

Now see what is happening. Just since 1950, the ratio of non-Christians to true believers has been cut by 67%. It has gone from 21 to 1, to just 7 to 1!

Just as Jesus predicted, His Church is irresistibly penetrating all the earth. We're getting closer to the time when truly the "*earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord*" (Hab 2:14).

## **CHURCHES IN EVERY NEIGHBORHOOD**

Jesus commanded the Church to go into all the world and disciple all the nations.

The word "nation" in the Bible means people-group, or group in which the people share the same culture and language. According to missionary leaders, there are about six thousand nations, or people groups, that still do not have a church.

It will take more than a few churches to disciple a nation. The only way to disciple a nation is to plant many churches within that nation.

This will require a strategy of SATURATION CHURCH PLANTING, which means planting churches in every neighborhood with a population of 500 to 1000 people.

This vision for SATURATION CHURCH PLANTING is not only for developing nations. It is for all nations including those in Europe, Latin America and North America.

Most leaders of existing churches do not get nervous thinking about a house church movement if it is located half a world away. However, if it is taking place within their city, there can be quite a different reaction.

We shout the praises of God for all the Chinese who are getting saved because of the house church movement in China. However, the shouting stops and sometimes becomes a growl of protest if that movement arrives in our town.

Why? Many fear that it will cause a division within their own church body and draw away some of their people.

It would be good if we could see this house church movement as a multiplying of congregations. Then every church within a given city could become active in multiplying congregations, rather than trying to build one giant congregation.

We would be challenged in the area of raising up new leaders. We should be doing this training of leaders anyway.

*“The field is the world”* (Matt 13:38). It is always the right time to reach all unsaved people all over the world.

No one should say, “Hey, do not start a church there. That is MY territory!” There is no church that is reaching all the unsaved in any city, or even in any neighborhood. We need all the help we can get to reach out to those in need.

If a house church movement will speed up the evangelization of my city, I want to start as many house churches as I can. I want to see that they multiply. I also want to encourage any other pastor who loves Jesus. I encourage him (or her) to multiply congregations within my city or any other city.

## DEVELOP UNPAID LAY LEADERS

Some people are concerned that multiplying house churches will lead to unqualified leaders. There is a concern that inept leaders will cause heresy and ignorance to grow.

This argument assumes that the rapid multiplication of congregations will empty our supply of qualified leaders. Some think that such multiplication will make it necessary to set over house churches men and women that God cannot use.

We need to keep in mind that Jesus did not go to the religious institutions of His day to pick leaders for His church. He chose men who were ignorant fishermen and plain everyday laymen. Then He empowered them with the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

God loves to use little things and weak things. Consider the following passage:

*“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise: and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.*

*“And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to naught things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence” (1Cor 1:26-29 kjv).*

There have been many worldwide, significant movements in the spread of the gospel throughout the history of the church. In each of them ordinary, everyday men and women have had a large role.

John Wesley was a man of great learning with years of education and religious training. He was the leader of one of the great revival and church planting movements of history. However, Wesley did not go to the established schools of religious training to find his pastors and leaders.

He said, "Give me twelve men who love Jesus with all their hearts and who do not fear men or devils. I care not one whit whether they be clergy or laity. With these men I will change the world." And that is just what Mr. Wesley did.

To preach the gospel in the open air in Wesley's day was the height of sacrilege. It was considered a serious affront to the established church. The sacred Word of God could not be proclaimed outside of a church building.

The Wesley brothers and George Whitefield suffered years of persecution for breaking the long-standing traditions of the established church. However, this did not stop them.

They knew the scriptures. They were convinced that if Jesus could break with tradition, it was acceptable for them to do the same.

Now we will quote again from the writings of the "father" of the church growth movement, Dr. McGavran. In his book UNDERSTANDING CHURCH GROWTH, he states:

"Develop unpaid lay leaders. Laymen have played a great part in urban expansions of the Church.

"From the beginning of church growth in the cities of Latin America, unpaid common men led the congregations.

"In some places laborers, mechanics, clerks or truck drivers teach the Bible — lead in prayer — tell what God has done for them — or exhort the brethren. In these places Christianity looks and sounds natural to ordinary men.

"Ministering laymen are subject to the same hazards, and bound by the same work schedules, as their congregation. They may lack in correctness of Bible teaching or beauty of prayers. However, they more than make up for this lack by their intimate contact with the common people.

"No paid worker from the outside can know as much about a neighborhood as someone who has dozens of intimate friends and relatives all about him.

"It is true that on 'new ground' an outsider has to be the one to start new works. No one else can. However, it is best if he soon turns the new churches over to local men."

In his book *BREAKING THE STAINED GLASS BARRIER*, David Womack wrote: “There is only one way the Great Commission can be fulfilled, and that is by establishing gospel-preaching congregations in every community on the face of the earth.”

Roger Greenway, a specialist in reaching cities, says in *DISCIPLING THE CITY*: “The church’s evangelistic task demands that every barrio, apartment building, and neighborhood have a church faithful to God’s Word established in it.”

## **CHURCHES BY THE MILLIONS**

Not long ago I was reading the book by Jim Montgomery entitled *DAWN 2000*. It has a subtitle that I could hardly believe: SEVEN MILLION CHURCHES TO GO. I thought to myself, “How could anyone even dare to think in terms of millions of churches?”

I had not read long before I knew that I could also believe for seven million churches to be planted throughout the world in the next several years.

I believe this because we are in the leading edge of the strongest missionary movement in the history of the world. There is more interest in reaching every tongue, tribe and nation now than there ever has been since Jesus ascended to the Father.

There is a great cry going up all over the world. It is: LET US FINISH THE TASK! LET US FULFILL THE COMMAND OF CHRIST TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO EVERY CREATURE. LET US OBEY HIS COMMAND TO DISCIPLE ALL THE NATIONS.

LET US BRING CHRIST BACK TO REIGN IN RIGHTEOUSNESS. LET US SEE THE KINGDOMS OF THIS WORLD BECOME THE KINGDOMS OF OUR GOD AND OF HIS CHRIST.

There is a groundswell that is gaining momentum daily.

Surely the stone that was cut without hands, which the prophet Daniel saw in his vision, is Christ. Daniel tells us how he saw this stone come crashing down to smite the feet of the statue which represents world powers (Dan 2:34).

This stone, which is Christ, is growing larger and gaining momentum. It has already crashed into the feet of this world's system. It will soon grow into a mountain that will cover the earth *“with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea”* (Isa 11:9).

The key to the fulfillment of the Great Commission is to plant churches.

There is a plan that is attracting the attention of many mission strategists these days. It is to plant a congregation of believers in every community which has from 500 to 1000 people. This is SATURATION CHURCH PLANTING.

We will have to discard our stained glass concept of church. We can no longer think of church as buildings.

We must begin to think of church as people. That means people coming together in the name of Jesus. They are coming together in homes, shops, offices, factories, stores, schools, mortuaries, parks, jails, prisons, hospitals, deserted buildings, street corners, halls, women's clubs, service clubs and even church buildings.

## **THE APPRENTICE SYSTEM**

The pressing question is: Where are you going to get all the pastors that will be needed to lead all these new churches?

A few years ago in Latin America several missionaries got together to make a plan for training young men for the ministry. Most of the people in their region were very poor. Therefore, it was highly unlikely that any of these men would ever be sent to a city to be educated in a theological school.

These missionaries set forth a plan called TEE — Theological Education by Extension. This was a course young men could take at home. It was an idea whose time had come. It became a very successful program.

Later, another missionary named George Patterson added another “E” to the name of this program. He called his plan TEEE—Theological Education and Evangelism by Extension. It was a plan for pastors to train young men for the ministry through an apprentice system.

The plan called for each pastor to oversee the personal training of the apprentice. He was to give the young man a “laboratory” for learning to pastor a church.

The “laboratory” was a real church, a small group of people meeting in a house or in some other place. The apprentice was sent out to pastor this group.

From time to time the apprentice would receive special assignments from his sponsoring pastor. These assignments were tasks such as reading certain books, listening to tapes, attending meetings or participating in seminars. Week by week the apprentice would fulfill the assignments given by his pastor-teacher.

The vision for multiplication would take place as each apprentice was taught to also sponsor another man out of his own congregation. Thus the vision of a church planting movement was becoming fulfilled.

## A WHEEL OR A VINE

Think of a wheel, lying on the ground, with spokes going out in all directions from a hub at the center of the wheel.

Now, think of a vine, growing on the ground, that begins in one place and reaches out its branches in all directions. These branches are each sending down roots which also grow into plants.

Each root is giving birth to another plant just like the first plant. All these new plants have the same potential to send out branches which also send down roots.

Which one, the wheel or the vine, best describes the SATURATION CHURCH PLANTING strategy? The VINE, of course.

It is not a question of which one works. They both work. One, however, works better than the other. Some churches are using the wheel concept and others are beginning to see the wisdom of the vine concept of church planting.

## THE WHEEL

The wheel concept calls for all the baby churches to be closely tied to, and dependent upon, the mother church. Normally they are not called churches. They are sometimes called “home groups” or “cell groups.” They are seen as an extension of the mother church.

All the people in the little groups meet during the week so that they can attend the mother church on Sunday morning. All tithes and offerings are channeled into the mother church.

The leaders of the cell groups are not seen as pastors. From time to time one of the cell churches is released to become a full- fledged church, and a pastor is appointed.

This, in essence, is the wheel concept. It has been very successful in some places and has produced some very large congregations.

## **THE VINE**

The vine concept of church planting can be illustrated by the spider plant. It has long, graceful, variegated leaves resembling a miniature weeping willow tree. Out from the leaves grow long vines that produce smaller spider plants at intervals along the vine.

The spider plant is usually planted in a hanging pot. The little baby spider plants never get as big as the mother plant. This is because, unlike the mother plant which has its roots potted in soil, the baby spider plants are left to dangle in the air. They receive all their life from the mother plant.

Now imagine that you take down this beautiful plant from its hanging position and plant it in the ground. Each one of the little baby spider plants begins to send down its own roots into the ground.

When that happens, each baby plant begins to grow and to send out new vines in all directions. In this way it eventually gives birth to an endless number of beautiful, mature spider plants.

## **TENDENCIES**

The wheel tends to draw unto itself; the vine tends to release outward.

The wheel tends to be local; the vine tends to be both within and outside its local area.

The wheel tends toward addition; the vine tends toward multiplication.

The wheel tends to build one church; the vine tends toward building many churches.

The wheel tends to restrict missionary vision; the vine tends to promote missionary vision.

The wheel encompasses the city; the vine encompasses the world.

The wheel trains group leaders; the vine trains pastors and leaders.

The wheel envisions cell groups, Bible studies or home groups; the vine envisions churches meeting in houses.

## **HOUSE CHURCHES**

May the Lord of the harvest give us a far-reaching vision for church planting. May this vision allow full freedom for the life of the church to express itself. May there be no restrictions on the expression of the life of the church! This is our prayer. Amen!

## **ARE CHURCH BUILDINGS REALLY NECESSARY?**

Howard Snyder has written a very important book entitled **THE PROBLEM WITH WINESKINS**. In it he deals in depth with the problems of church structures.

He tells of the unfolding purposes of God for His Church. He speaks of our inability at times to make the proper adjustments to these purposes. The following is from the chapter entitled "Are Church Buildings Superfluous?"

“Just think of it! Imagine yourself in any important city in the first century where Christianity had penetrated.

“Now ask the question, ‘Where is the church?’ You would be directed to a group of worshiping people gathered in a house.

“There was no special building or evidence of wealth with which to associate church. There were only people.”

Walter Oetting in his book *THE CHURCH IN THE CATACOMBS* wrote: “Christians did not begin to build church buildings until about A.D. 200. This fact suggests that buildings are not essential for numerical growth or spiritual depth.

“The early church possessed both growth and depth. Until recent times, the church’s greatest period of vitality and growth was during the first two centuries A.D. In other words, the church grew fastest when it did not have the help — or hindrance — of church buildings.”

I believe the Lord is calling His people to repent of the over-emphasis we have given to buildings in past centuries. He is calling us to get rid of all barriers to the rapid planting of churches.

This is so that “*the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified*” (2Thess 3:1). One of the primary hindrances, in many cases, is the building we call “the church.”

## **BREAKING THE STAINED GLASS BARRIER**

Dr. Donald McGavran, in his book, *Understanding Church Growth*, says: “House churches enabled the tiny church of the 1st Century to grow mightily. At one stroke they overcame four obstacles to growth. These were obstacles which the Church met as it liberated new populations:

(1) “The cost of a church building. Without any cash outlay at all, house churches provided as many places to worship as there were groups of Christians. This first common obstacle to multiplying churches never appeared.”

(2) “The obstacle of the Jewish connection. House churches pushed the Church away from the synagogue into the Gentile population.”

(3) “The obstacle of turning inward. Each new house church exposed a new set of intimate friends and relatives to close contact with ardent Christians.”

(4) “The obstacle of a limited leadership. Each house church thrust the responsibilities and prestige of leadership on able men of the new congregation. These leaders worked within the teachings of the Old Testament, oral tradition of Jesus’s life and a letter or two of Paul’s. With these flexible boundaries, they were free to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.”

“In modern form, these four obstacles and their solutions are still important. When we talk about causes of the growth of the Early Church, we should take into account the physical fact of the house churches.”

SATURATION CHURCH PLANTING calls for a breakthrough. We must break through the “stained glass barrier” into the simple, open fellowship of God’s people. We must see this fellowship in as many forms as the Holy Spirit will lead us, and not be afraid to call it church.

Whether we are meeting in Jesus’ name in a cathedral or in a kitchen, it is still church. It is still God’s called out, assembled people.

Yes, we will use buildings. However, we will never allow buildings to hinder our mobility, vision or zeal to multiply congregations.

## **THE CONSTANTINE FIASCO**

James Rutz, in his book *THE OPEN CHURCH*, says: “What really killed us was the bricks! In the biggest blunder in her history, the Church began constructing lots of buildings.

“She displaced the catacombs (underground tombs) and forest glens in which the saints met. She ended forever the warm, precious meetings in someone’s living room.

“Modeled after the Roman forums, the new buildings held hundreds of Christians. Of course, you can’t have intimate, easy interaction with that size

crowd. A new sanctuary, from the first Sunday it was opened, put limits on free expression. The new crib strangled the baby.

“Imagine you were living at that time.

“You may have felt at ease confessing a sin to a couple dozen friends over at Josephus and Johanna’s (or let us call them Joe and Jane). But could you do THAT in front of five hundred strangers?

“If God lay something strongly on your heart this week, you wouldn’t hesitate to stand up and spend ten or fifteen minutes sharing it in Joe and Jane’s living room. But here in the new hall there are probably at least a dozen men and women with a message burning in their hearts. You’d probably never have the chance to express yourself!

“Over at Joe and Jane’s, everybody got into the act in the worship time. You were able to praise the Lord from your heart, again and again as you felt led. It was the most meaningful and healing moment of your week. But here in this new building? You would have to wait your turn — which may never come!

“I could go on, but you get the idea. Without modern electronic sound equipment open meetings became difficult. Not TOO difficult, mind you, just difficult. So closed meetings took over.

“All speaking became centralized in a pulpit. Order was maintained. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

“At Joe and Jane’s, you were a participant. Here, you are a spectator — a passive listener. Somehow you do not feel important or needed anymore.”

## **PARADISE LOST**

“When we switched from living rooms to church buildings with a professional staff, we lost all momentum. The local church became weak and cold.

“Non-priests were termed ‘laymen,’ a word not even found in the Bible — and for good reason.

“As a ‘layman’ in a Fourth Century church building, you no longer approached God directly. The priest did so on your behalf.

“In this way an architectural problem turned into a doctrinal problem. The priesthood of the believer was lost.

“The Bible was taken from the hands of the layman and given to the priest. If you are not allowed to decide what it means, why bother to read it?”

## **THE ROAD TO RUIN**

“What really went wrong? As I said, the church got so big and popular that it could erect its own buildings.

“Unfortunately, this solved a long-standing ‘problem’ that should have been left standing: Whenever a healthy house church got too big for its living room, it had to split — into two living rooms. New leadership was thus always being thrust upward through the ranks.

“But when church buildings began to sprout up everywhere, congregations no longer had to face that ‘problem’. No longer was there the awkward anguish of who got to stay with the favorite elders, and who had to split off with the less popular ones. Everybody stayed with everybody.

“The trouble was, sharing and intimacy were tricky in a crowd of 500. The big crowds put much importance on excellent speaking. Therefore, the stuttering new converts started to stay hidden ‘in their shells.’

“Being unknown by one another replaced fellowship. Communication during meetings began to be dominated by the few who had books and could read. In the end, that meant the priests.

“The laity (or non-priests) were citizens of a long-crumbling Roman Empire. They were turned into spiritual ‘eunuchs.’ They lost the strength the Empire needed so desperately at that time.

“By 476, Rome fell for the final time. Then the Church led the way into the Dark Ages.”

## **THE PROPER USE OF BUILDINGS**

We are not suggesting that buildings have no place in the expansion of the Kingdom of God. The Lord will surely give us wisdom and direction as to how to make use of buildings of all sorts in the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

However, we must never fall into an unhealthy and unscriptural attitude as to the importance of a building when planting and nurturing churches.

Churches can surely function without the aid of specially constructed buildings. This has been proven in church history throughout the ages. In fact, history shows that the church will actually grow faster and be healthier without church buildings than with them.

The house church movement is only a part of the move of God back to simplicity. God is moving on many fronts to bring His Church into holiness and purity. This has always been His will and design.

It is not as if God suddenly woke up one day to the Church's need and started a movement to meet it. It is just that finally there are more and more people hearing what the Lord has been saying all the time: "GIVE ME BACK MY CHURCH!!!"

I am convinced that the attitude of the Church should be, "Lord, unless you specifically tell us to build, buy or rent buildings, we are going to plant and multiply churches without them."

I am open to the idea of buildings, but I am not open to restricting church planting to the traditional building-centered idea of church. The need for SATURATION CHURCH PLANTING is too great.

We will never fulfill the Great Commission in the foreseeable future by continuing to embrace the traditional concept of church. That idea will simply not allow for a massive movement of church planting that will be necessary to disciple the nations.

For centuries, the Church has elaborately and ornately designed and decorated beautiful, awe-inspiring buildings. These have been called churches.

In some cases these buildings called churches have themselves become objects of worship. Huge sums of money dedicated to God have been spent on erecting and maintaining these "sacred" buildings.

This era is coming to an end. There is a movement among God's people back to simplicity. It is a move away from institutionalized, politicized and over-organized Christianity.

The New Testament must be our guide for faith and practice in all things. Let it be our guide in this matter of church buildings. Let it guide our understanding concerning the true place of buildings in the worldwide spread of the message of Jesus Christ our Lord.

## ONE STEP TO UNITY

Someone may ask, "But will not all these little house churches scattered throughout a city cause division and disunity within the Body of Christ in that town?"

The truth is that little churches cause no more division than big ones. Very large churches and very small churches have the same challenge when it comes to unity.

## ORGANIZATIONAL UNITY OR SPIRITUAL UNITY

In the late 1970s I was involved with a new Christian organization called "John Seventeen Twenty-one." It was an effort to help encourage and promote unity within the Body of Christ both in the United States and in other countries.

This organization was based on the prayer of Jesus found in John 17:21: *"That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me."*

Over a period of several years we tried to bring God's people together in retreats, encounters, happenings, parades, marches, prayer gatherings and in every possible way. We believed that through our organized "unity" the world would see and believe.

It was one of the most frustrating efforts I had ever been a part of. It was not that these events do not have their place of importance. Surely, they do. But we were trying to organize unity, and unity just was not happening.

Unity will never happen through organization. It must happen in the spirit through an understanding of what unity is.

One day I began to question our understanding of John 17:21. I saw, first of all, that we had not rightly interpreted Jesus' prayer. He was not praying for organizational unity in that passage. He was praying for **spiritual unity**. Moreover, Jesus was not praying for spiritual unity among believers. He was praying for the individual believer's union with the Father, not for the union of believers with each other.

This whole passage of Jesus' prayer deals with the individual's union with the Father and the Son. It does not deal with the believer's relationship with other believers.

A wrong interpretation of this passage causes much painful frustration. It also misses the true meaning of what Jesus is really praying for.

John 17:21 could be paraphrased as follows: "That each one of them may be one with You, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me."

The world will never be convinced that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, by means of organizational union. God always uses men and women who have that same united relationship with the Father that Jesus had.

God's plan is still the same — to fill men with His Spirit and demonstrate His love and power through them. What He did through Jesus, He wants to do all over the world.

He wants to live in us and walk in us. He wants to do works of love and grace through us, just like He did through Jesus. This is the meaning of John 17:21.

## **ONE CITY—ONE CHURCH**

The only kind of unity that is dealt with in the New Testament is spiritual unity and its results. We search in vain to find any word in the Bible concerning Christian organizations, societies, missions or anything that looks like our present organizational structures.

What we do find in the New Testament is spiritual authority being sent out in the ministry of apostles and prophets. We see that authority being received by the churches. We see a united church within each city held together by *“the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (Eph 4:3).

Paul the apostle never wrote to the “churches” of any city. He always addressed his letters to “the church” of that particular city.

There was and is only one church in each city, or locality. He writes to “the church” in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and so forth. However, he writes to “the churches” in Galatia, “the churches in Asia,” and so forth. This is because these were provinces and not cities.

There may be scores or even hundreds of “churches” that meet in Jesus’ name within a given city. However, there is really only one church in that locality. This one church consists of the many smaller Christian gatherings in that city. Just as all the churches in all the cities in the world make up the Body of Christ, the churches (congregations) within a locality make up the church in that city.

## **KEEP THE UNITY**

In Ephesians 4:3-6 we read, *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism: one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”*

In the above passage Paul did not say, “Establish the unity of the Spirit.” He said, *“keep the unity of the Spirit.”* It is as if this unity were something that was already established. He speaks here as if unity is something that comes automatically as a part of the whole Christian “package.”

We are born again into unity because *“there is one Body and one Spirit... one Lord... one God and Father.”* Our part is simply an acknowledgment that we are already one.

To fulfill the command to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is to keep something that we already have, for you cannot keep what you do not yet have.

This unity is not in external structures. It is not born in external ties, nor is it maintained by external ties. It is born in the Spirit and in the heart. It is an interior attitude. It is an attitude toward people — the people of God.

## UNITY WITH DIVERSITY

We can have all the diversity we want in organizations, denominations, corporations, societies, clubs, fellowships, movements, crusades and campaigns, and still have unity in the Spirit.

We are not held together by “paper membership.” We are held together by *“the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*

On the other hand, you can have one giant organization that includes every Christian on earth and still have no real unity in the Spirit. You may have organizational oneness without real unity.

The *“bond”* in Ephesians 4:3-6 speaks of something that ties together like a rope or belt. That bond is *“peace.”* It is called *“the bond of peace.”* The opposite of peace is strife or war.

If you have an attitude of love and acceptance toward your brothers and sisters in other churches, you are *“keeping the unity”* with them. You are not creating it. You are keeping it alive in your own spirit.

That is where unity exists — in the spirit or heart. Unity is manifested in different ways, but it exists in the spirit by means of the Holy Spirit.

Conversely, if you have an attitude of strife, divisiveness or sectarianism, you are not keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

## AN INWARD STEP

The only step to unity, then, is found in Romans 14:1 and 15:7: *“Accept those whose faith is weak without passing judgment on disputable matters....*

*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.”*

The word “to accept” means to welcome, embrace, receive — to acknowledge kinship. To accept means to confess and declare the fact that we are one.

We are one because, by the new birth, we have all been born into the same spiritual family. We are all brothers and sisters because Jesus is our Savior, and God is our Father! Just as Jesus received us with all our brokenness, faults, and immaturity, so let us receive one another.

## **TAKE THE STEP NOW**

This one step to unity can be taken right where you are this very moment. You can turn to the Lord right now and pray, “Father, in the name of Jesus Christ my Lord, I do acknowledge that I am a member of Your spiritual body, the church in this city and throughout the world.

“I do accept and receive every one of Your children as my brother or sister because You are our Father. It doesn’t matter where Your children live. It doesn’t matter from what race they come. It doesn’t matter what peculiar beliefs or practices they may have.

“It doesn’t matter if they baptize by sprinkling or by immersion, or whether they are Arminianists or Calvinists. It doesn’t matter if they go to church on Saturday, Sunday, Monday or Tuesday. It doesn’t matter by what denomination they are named.

“I do now declare, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth the Son of God Almighty, that I am one with every other born-again believer that lives, that has lived, or ever will live in time and in eternity. I will accept them. I will receive them.

“I will love them and support them. I will pray for them. As You direct me, Lord, I will work with them. I will endeavor to keep this unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Amen!”

Will you pray this prayer now? If you can sincerely pray the above prayer, you have taken the one step to unity.

## **DOCTRINAL UNITY**

“But,” you may ask, “what about doctrinal unity? How can we walk together unless we agree?”

In the first place, God is not directing us all to walk in the same direction. In the second place, we are told in Ephesians 4:13 that we are to keep this unity of the Spirit *“until we all come into the unity of the faith.”* This verse is simply saying that we can have spiritual unity while we are coming into doctrinal unity.

## ONE CENTRAL TRUTH

There is only one central truth around which we can all declare our unity. That truth is not a teaching, a concept, a principle or a doctrine. It is not a church, denomination or a movement.

That Truth is a person. Jesus is the Truth. He said, *“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”* (John 14:6).

When we come to Him, He gives us life. We are born again! When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”* the answer was not, “Believe our doctrine and join our organization.” It was, *“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved”* (Acts 16:30,31). We believe on the person of Jesus and are born into the kingdom of light. When we are joined to Jesus we are joined to one another. We are one in Him.

He who has Jesus has life. He who does not have Jesus does not have life. We are saved, not by embracing a doctrinal position, but by receiving Jesus Christ Himself.

## RECEIVE ONE ANOTHER

In every church, whether it is a house church or some other kind of church, we must teach the people to accept every other believer. We are members of the same Body without regard to denominational affiliation.

God will lead us at times to cooperate together with others in projects for spreading His kingdom. However, the most powerful expression of unity is not

coming together to show outward solidarity by promoting special projects. It is in accepting and affirming one another in what we are already doing with the Lord.

## **MANY LEADERS-ONE ARMY**

We are all in warfare and there are many generals, lieutenants, captains and foot soldiers. However, there is one Head, our Commander in Chief, Jesus Christ Himself.

He said, *“I will build my church,”* and that is what He is doing (Matt 16:18). Let us make room for Him to do it. He has charge of every small unit of His mighty army.

We may be in different divisions, in different units, on a different front, but we are still one army. We are one people, fighting the same war against the kingdom of darkness.

Let us affirm and support one another in our various places of service. Let us not think that we are separated just because we’re not all in the same place doing the same things at the same time, under the same standard bearer.

## **MANY TRIBES — ONE NATION**

There were twelve tribes in Israel, each with its own territory, genealogy, leaders and banner. But they were still one people — Israel.

We may be made up of hundreds or thousands of denominations, organizations and churches. However, we are one people — the people of God — the Israel of God.

We do not have to be physically together doing the same things under the same flag in order to be one. We are already one. So let us boldly proclaim our unity. Let us go about our business of extending His kingdom while affirming, accepting and receiving one another. That is *“keeping the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”*

## WHAT DO YOU DO IN A HOUSE CHURCH?

If you have never attended a house church meeting, your first questions might be, “What would a house church be like? Would there be singing? Would there be a sermon?”

“Would there be an invitation to receive Christ? Would there be baptisms and Holy Communion? What about Sunday School? Midweek prayer service?”

It is significant that neither Paul the apostle nor Jesus Himself gave specific instructions to us in the written Word as to exactly what should be done when we congregate as a church.

Jesus’ words were very simple in Matthew 18:20: *“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”* He did not say they had to be doing certain things in order for Him to be in their midst. They just needed to be gathered together.

The Apostle Paul gave us a little insight into the nature of early church gatherings in 1 Corinthians 14:26: *“What 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 things must be done for the strengthening of the church.”*

Church meetings in those days did not emphasize a certain speaker. They were open meetings where each person was to contribute for the benefit of the whole body. The exercise of spiritual gifts was encouraged so that all were blessed and edified.

There are no specific instructions left to us by Jesus or His apostles as to exactly what to do in our regular gatherings. However, we can find in the Book of Acts and the epistles some of the essential elements of a church meeting. The following are some of the things that are important to observe when we come together:

**Make the following bullets:**

- Praise and worship
- Prophetic ministry gifts

- Other gifts of the Spirit
- Sharing testimonies
- Communion
- Announcements
- Praying For one another
- Teaching

The Holy Spirit will guide you as to how much time to give to each segment and the order in which they occur. At times some of them would not be included at all, but as a rule, it would be well to include all of them.

### **Praise And Prayer**

It is always good to begin each meeting with an extended time of ministry to the Lord through songs of praise and worship. Time should be allowed for informal prayers in the midst of the worship.

As the Holy Spirit begins to move upon us while we are worshiping, it is altogether appropriate to lift up our prayers to the Lord. Sometimes this will be done just between ourselves and God. At other times He will impress us to pray out loud so that others may say “AMEN” to our prayer.

Musicians are an added blessing during the praise time. Pray that God will give your house church a strong and skillful praise team. While this is not absolutely essential, it is certainly a boost to the praise time.

Many groups will not have anyone who plays an instrument to lead out in the praise time. There are a number of powerful praise tapes that could be used to serve as background music as the people sing along with the tape.

Do not cut short the praise time. Let every other part of the meeting be shortened before you even consider cutting short the praise and worship time.

The most vital and dynamic churches today are those that give major time and attention to praise and worship. There will be times when the Holy Spirit will lead you to do nothing more than praise the Lord. Be open to His leading. All things flow out of the fountain of prayer, praise and worship.

### **Ministry To One Another**

This is a time for sharing ministry gifts according to 1 Corinthians 14:26: *“How is it brethren? When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.”*

In an open meeting, the leader directs and encourages the group to share testimonies, experiences, prayer requests, brief teachings, revelations, praise reports and so forth.

Be watchful that a few bold persons do not dominate the sharing time. Draw out the quiet ones by asking questions.

We want to share financial blessings according to 2 Corinthians 9:6-8 — *“But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.”*

*“Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.”*

*“And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work.”*

The second part of the sharing time is giving to the Lord. This is such a vital part of a worship service that it deserves at least a brief teaching on “the grace of giving” each time we meet.

Many sincere believers fall into the bondage of poverty because they have not understood the spiritual principle of generosity. Many of us are learning that our greatest weapon in times of financial distress is our generosity.

Our people need to know this and be strengthened in the grace of giving. The majority of the offerings should go for the support of spiritual leaders who give full time to pastoring, evangelizing and planting churches.

A generous amount should go for missionary work in other nations. God will richly bless the church that has a vision for the whole world and not just its own neighborhood.

## **Announcements**

We need to inform our people as to special meetings, plans for outreaches, sharing what God is doing within the city, nation and around the world. We must focus on the work of the Lord to a larger scale than just our little congregation.

We are world Christians. Jesus said, "*Lift up your eyes and look on the fields....*" (John 4:35).

We are only a small part of the larger picture. Let us keep our eyes and our hearts and our prayers on the world as we seek to do our part in bringing the Kingdom of God to earth.

### **Communion — 1 Corinthians 11:20-34**

This is also a teaching time. Before taking the bread and the cup, let someone very briefly explain some aspect of the meaning of communion. Then let the brothers and sisters partake of the body and the blood of our Lord with understanding and faith.

This can be a very powerful time. It is a good time to give an invitation to the unbelievers present to receive Christ as their Lord. Lead them in a prayer to receive Him before you serve the bread and the cup.

Many people are ready to receive Jesus. Give a brief explanation of the gospel and lead the congregation in a prayer of receiving Christ. Many are led to Christ in this way.

Those who receive Christ as Savior should receive water baptism immediately. The example of the early church in the Book of Acts was always to baptize new converts on the day they received Jesus.

### **Ministry**

Be open to minister to one another through the laying on of hands, praying for the sick, prophetic ministry, praying to receive the baptism in the Holy Spirit and so forth.

Let all the gifts of the Spirit flow freely for the edification of all according to 1 Corinthians 14.

## Teaching

Someone should bring a brief teaching from the Word of God. Normally this is not a lengthy “sermon.” Because of the open church format, the Holy Spirit is teaching all through various ones who participate.

Throughout the centuries, the “sermon” or teaching time has enlarged more and more until it has almost excluded group participation. This has led to a spectator type of service in which one person is using his gifts while the rest watch, listen and receive.

The service should be pastor-led, but not pastor-centered. The more the pastor/leader involves the members of the church, the more effective the meeting will be. This will result in trained pastors and leaders and will lead the way to giving birth to more house churches.

The above is a suggested format for a house church meeting. The Holy Spirit will guide all the details in each meeting. Do not make it a program. The Spirit may lead you to do it differently. He has given us liberty to emphasize various things at different times.

Important elements of any church are praise, worship, prayer, sharing, informing, teaching God’s Word, encouraging the release of spiritual gifts, the grace of giving, water baptism, the baptism in the Holy Spirit, Holy Communion, evangelism and personal ministry to one another.

These are some of the things that Jesus was talking about when He said, *“teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, and, lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age”* (Matt 28:20).

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The following are frequently asked questions about house churches:

**Q.** Why house churches?

**A.** We plant house churches for the following reasons:

1. Our goal is not just to start a church. Our goal is to start a church planting movement. We believe this can best be done by focusing on the simplest and most reproducible form of church planting. The house church meets that need.
2. We believe the house church concept is the best way to train pastors and leaders.
3. The simplicity of small congregations makes it easy to multiply congregations.
4. God is calling His people to break with traditionalism and professionalism and get back to simplicity.
5. In most countries today it is the only way to get a church planting movement going. We cannot possibly do SATURATION CHURCH PLANTING if we are thinking in terms of traditional church.

**Q. Isn't the house church the same as the cell group?**

**A.** No, the cell group concept is the wheel approach and the house church is the vine approach. A cell group is seen as a part of the outreach of another church whereas a house church is a church in itself and functions as a church.

**Q. How can you develop a full church program in a house church?**

**A.** We believe that if we focus on the things mentioned in chapter six (WHAT DO YOU DO IN A HOUSE CHURCH?), the Lord will enable us to meet the needs of all the individuals and families who attend. The Holy Spirit is able to make us creative in our approach to meeting needs. House churches will not be attractive to everyone. Some will need to attend churches with the ability to present more diverse programs. We are not in competition with other churches. We are working together with them to help fulfill the Great Commission.

**Q. What about children? Will they have special classes?**

**A.** Some house churches will have children's meetings separate from youth and adults. Some will have all ages meeting together. It is surprising how much little children learn just being with youth and adults in the regular service.

**Q. How often do house churches meet?**

**A.** Once or twice a week is common, but that is up to the leaders of each house church. There is nothing in the Bible that says how often we should meet.

**Q. Do you always meet in the same house?**

**A.** It is not always wise to meet in the same house for the following reasons:

1. We need to spread around the blessing of hosting a house church.
2. By moving the meeting place from time to time we are able to reach out into different neighborhoods.
3. We are held together by the bonds of relationship and not by the meeting place. Therefore it is safe to move about.
4. We avoid the problem of neighbors complaining about holding religious services in their neighborhood.

**Q. Will not the house church idea open it up for anyone and everyone to start his own church?**

**A.** The Apostle Paul said in Romans 10:15, *“How shall they preach except they be sent?”* Only those who have been sent will have spiritual authority to plant churches. Even Paul did not venture to go and plant churches until he had been sent by the Holy Spirit and by the leadership of his church. (Read Acts 13:1-4.)

**Q. Where will you get pastors to lead these congregations?**

**A.** The true qualifications for elders (pastors) are found in two places in the New Testament; Titus 1:6-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7. God has provided plenty of humble, teachable, godly men and women right in our churches who are capable of leading house churches. We do not need to send them off to be trained in Bible schools or seminaries. The apprentice method is the best method under heaven for training pastors and leaders. There never was a better method and there never will be!

**Q. How can a small house church be expected to give birth to another house church?**

**A.** When I was still a teenager, my pastor gave me the task of starting Home Bible Classes among the elderly who did not attend Sunday School. I was not given any helpers or members to start with. I was only given a few names and addresses of people who might be interested in home Bible study.

During the next several months I had the joy of establishing Bible classes in many homes. My task was not only to teach the Word of God to the elderly but to learn how to start house groups.

This is a part of the training of an elder. He is given a territory and the task of starting a new house church. In most cases he will be given at least one or two couples to help him get started. Ideally, one of the couples will be pastors-in-training so that from the very beginning of a new church there is vision for church planting.

A very small house church can send out two or three couples each year to give birth to a new church.

**Q. How do you start a house church?**

**A.** In Acts chapter 13 it was the Holy Spirit Who sent Paul and Barnabas out to start churches. But He did it by revealing to the leaders of the church in Antioch that He had called them to do this.

In Acts 15:24 some people got into trouble who “went” without being “sent.” Assuming that you have been sent out by responsible spiritual authority, get two or three people who are not already involved in a church to agree to meet with you regularly to worship Jesus and to walk in His ways together and you have planted a new church.

When Paul and his teams went out, they first proclaimed the good news and then they gathered the disciples together. The gathering of the disciples together is church.

**Q. Are you suggesting that everyone leave the traditional church and become a member of a house church?**

**A.** It is not our purpose to tear down anything that God is building. We are committed to bless and to assist all the churches in every city, large or small, denominational, non-denominational, or inter-denominational.

We do not compete with other churches. We are simply presenting a valid expression of church that is based on the Word of God and that has proven effective both in the primitive church and in modern times.

We do not say that God is calling all His people in all places to be doing the exact same thing. The Church of Jesus Christ is amazingly fluid and versatile in its many expressions when it is not bound by rigid and inflexible rules.

**Q. Do house churches have to belong to a denomination?**

**A.** Every house church in any city belongs to the church, the body of Christ, in that city, first and foremost. A house church may belong to a denomination. However, its ties to the denomination should not interfere with its commitment and relationship to the body of Christ within that locality.

The greatest challenge to any church is maintaining unity within the larger body of Christ in the city where you live and serve (see chapter 7).

There are many other questions one might ask about house churches, but the most important one is, “Lord, what do you want **me** to do to help fulfill the Great Commission? Should I be involved in multiplying house churches in my own country and throughout the world?”

There are many ways to plant new churches and thus extend the kingdom of God in the earth. We will accept and not criticize the various ways that God’s people are seeking to plant churches.

It is my purpose to sound the trumpet to start house churches.

We say to you, COME AND HELP US! We are excited about multiplying churches in every country and people group so *“that repentance and remission of sins will be preached in his name to all nations”* (Luke 24:47).

## **SUMMARY**

It is my firm belief that by now, there will be a house church movement in full swing in every country on earth. I believe it is the only way we will see the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

It is already beginning to happen. God is speaking HOUSE CHURCH to people everywhere. The ground work has been laid over the past 25 years through the worldwide acceptance of the cell group movement.

Some of us are old enough to remember when it was highly questionable to start a house group of any kind, or anything else outside the church buildings themselves. There used to be such fear that it would draw people away from the “church.” Now, these groups are seen as very desirable as a means of church growth.

God is calling us to take a further step and recognize that we can actually have a church, in the fullest sense of the word, in a house.

Some of the largest congregations in the world today had their beginning in a house. When did it become a church? Was it a church when it had ten people and met in a house? Or was it a church only when it had a thousand people? Was it a church only when it met in a specially designed building called a “church?”

The answer is obvious. It was a church when it began in the house. If it had continued to meet in a house, it would have continued to be a church.

God is stirring and shaking our present church structures and bringing us back to basics. Much of what we now have come to think of as essential is not really essential at all.

When we look at the simplicity of the New Testament Church and compare it with the institutionalized church of our day we see little, if any, resemblance.

The Church in some countries looks more like a corporation. Some denominations are huge networks that, in many cases, are ruled over politically, rather than through God-ordained spiritual authority. This has caused immeasurable grief and division for hundreds of years.

May God give us the insight, humility and grace to admit how far we have strayed from the simplicity and the purity of the New Testament Church. Then let us return to it in brokenness and repentance.