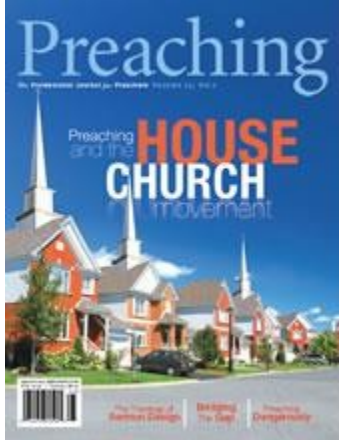


## **Preaching and the House Church Movement**



### ***Preaching and the House Church Movement*** ***By Sara Horn***

House Church. For pastors, the mere term once conjured up images of angry men and women gathered around a kitchen table, condemning the mistakes and failures of the traditional church they had left for one reason or another. These finger-pointers started their own movements, their own groups, and as far as some were concerned, their own cults, defining theology in their own terms with no clear view of where their accountability rested except far from the oversight of the pastor they left.

It would seem that times have changed. According to a report put out last year by the Barna Group, roughly 70 million Americans regularly attend or have experimented with a house church. Twenty million of those attend a house church solely as their primary method of worship. All told, research points to an increase in house church involvement of almost 8 percent since 1996, growth that is being noticed and carefully watched by church leaders. Ed Stetzer was recently appointed director of research for LifeWay Christian Resources, but in his prior position at the North American Mission Board, he did his own study, following up on what Barna had discovered about the rise and growth of house churches as an alternative faith community. Stetzer's research, done in conjunction with Zogby International, discovered that of the 3,600 Americans they polled, 50 attend a small group of 20 or less and rarely "or never" attend a place of worship.

"If extrapolated, Stetzer wrote in his report, this is almost 1.4 percent of the American population and may represent the purest measure of those who are not involved in an organized church, synagogue or mosque but still are involved in some alternative faith community like, in the Christian faith, a house church. That is about four million—not a small number.

While the numbers are striking and offer the first examples of hard numerical data of a trend once too nebulous to track, pastors want to know what numbers can't always answer: why people are looking to house churches for spiritual growth and support over what is already offered by conventional and mega churches. The answer, John Huffman believes, is a desire for spiritual intimacy. "I think it's basically two ends of the spectrum," said Huffman, senior pastor of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, Calif. On one hand, you have a craving for intimacy; on the other, you want to be part of something big, successful and thriving.

Huffman believes it is a cycle as old as time.

This is nothing new—what comes around goes around and comes back again, he said, pointing out that mega churches were around in the 1920s. “Many people leave their little church because they like the excitement and all the activities of the big church, but then they crave intimacy again, and want to know and be known. The house church comes out of that desire; that’s why the best of the big churches build around the small group.

### **The DNA of a House Church**

When the church Jeff Henning served as pastor went through a major division in the late nineties, he began studying cell group ministry. Since 1996, he and his wife have run a house church called Break Bread Ministries in Marietta, Georgia. To Henning, the benefits of the house church compared with a brick and mortar church are like night and day.

“The brick and mortar church has changed,” said Henning. “It used to be a local community congregation in the neighborhood, where the pastor knows the families and would visit the family. In the church today, there is a lot of driving in from other areas; you may not sit next to the same person week after week.”

Henning, who has a total of 18 adults and 4 children attending his house church, believes a greater bond develops within the house church, and one of the biggest benefits is what he says is a better foundation for discipleship.

“Traditional churches recruit you to come in and then you have to grow on your own; a pastor has to prepare his sermon for different spiritual levels,” said Henning. “By knowing the group, we know the spiritual level, we’re dialoguing about the Word, just preaching sermons.”

In fact, greater satisfaction may be one of the traits of today’s house church, according to some research. Barna followed up their first survey on house churches with a survey that examined the satisfaction level of those who attend house churches. The report, released in January of this year, indicates that two thirds of house church attendees were “completely satisfied” with the leadership of their church, compared to only half of those attending a conventional church. When it came to the faith commitment of those attending, two-thirds were “completely satisfied” within the house church while only four out of 10 were satisfied with the faith commitment of people in their congregation.

“In any city in America today,” said Neil Cole, a church planter for more than 17 years and author of *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens*, “you can go to a few churches and park in a parking lot where someone with a yellow vest will direct you to a space. Someone you don’t know will hand you a sheet of paper. You’ll sit down in the crowd of people you don’t know, stare at the back of the head of someone, listen to someone you don’t know give you three ways to improve your life and the only contact you have is a two-minute neighbor nudge where you introduce yourself and that’s called church.

“Deeper substance can only be received when you personally ingest God’s Word for yourself, without someone else ingesting it for you.”

### **Can small groups be just as effective?**

A key question might be whether small groups can meet the same needs that house churches appear to be meeting.

Unquestionably, the best form of community is done in a smaller group setting," said Rick White, senior pastor of The People's Church, a 6,000-member congregation in Franklin, Tenn., with a simulcast location in nearby Spring Hill. While the church offers a variety of small groups— including home groups—White said the church's recent annual census revealed that more than 1,000 people are not connected to any small group within the church.

In an effort to persuade and challenge church members to transition from *coming* to church to *being* the church, White said monthly meal groups are being implemented with the hope that more people will find connections and new ways of "doing life together."

White believes that most house churches are not that different from what is done in a small group that relates to a traditional church. Typically, a meal may be shared, prayer for one another occurs, Bible study and discussion take place and often there is a time for singing and worship.

Regardless of small group or house church labels, Neil Cole says it is important that our understanding of church shift from seeing it as a weekly religious service to a regular, ongoing spiritual family. In a conventional church, the majority of people serve as "recipients or the audience," he says, not as an "active participant. I think with Christianity we're all supposed to be on the playing field, not just in the stand."

Cole says the advantage with the house church is that it allows and expects participation. "You can't just shrink the church, put it in the living room and be non-participatory. The reason you see such large numbers moving toward this movement is it involves all of the body of Christ. It's throughout the week, not just one hour and a half."

### **Preaching vs. discussion?**

Imagine standing in your pulpit one Sunday morning, proclaiming to your congregation the message God led you to prepare all week. You've just gone into your second main point when suddenly, a hand shoots up from the back of the church and John Smith says, "Can I add something to what you just said?"

While that may not be conducive in a traditional church, it is typical and even expected in the house church environment. Very little traditional preaching occurs in a home setting— instead, someone leads a topic and the rest of the group interacts with the discussion. House church attendees will often take turns in leading the Bible discussion from week to week using resources found in the local Christian bookstore or their own time of Bible study, and it is more common than not that those who are leading have had no previous religious or doctrinal training. This practice makes some cringe, but for church leaders like Neil Cole, he sees it as a necessary need in America today.

"I don't think we will see spiritual awakening until our people hear directly from God without any middle men," said Cole. "God is always speaking, we're just not listening."

He points out that despite the fact that Americans today have the most versions of the Bible available anywhere in the world, and many of those versions in their own homes, we are also the most Biblically illiterate.

"We can't understand the Bible unless someone else tells us what it means," said Cole. "Do we really think God is such a poor communicator that we need someone else to translate it?" While he is not against scholarship, Cole said that a dependency has been created for scholarship and as a result, people are not intentionally seeking to hear directly from God.

No one would disagree that individuals need to seek out what God is saying for themselves but the question of accountability does arise. How do house churches stay accountable to the inerrancy and truth of the Scriptures? How would a group know if what they are being taught isn't really faithful to the Word of God?

Jeff Henning believes it is the very nature of the house church and the individual responsibility everyone maintains that keeps that accountability in line. In his house church, he says there are "mature elders that we all listen to." If someone has a doubt or a question of something that's been said, the group can stop right at that point to discuss it. If they can't come to an agreement or answer right then, they can agree to take time that week to research and read what the Bible has to say about it, and then they can come back and discuss it again.

House churches can also find accountability with other more traditional churches. The leader of the Microchurch Network, a network of eight house churches in Lancaster, Penn., sits on a regional board with Larry Kreider and other megachurch pastors and community churches, learning and growing side by side. Kreider says, "There is a real understanding we can all work together." Of course, such accountability is far from universal and completely optional for house churches.

This hunger for discussion and more individual study could be a signal to pastors to challenge themselves and their congregations to ask more questions as they probe more deeply into what the Bible teaches. Pastors could offer a separate time for discussion of the message—a session that would give church members a chance to talk and ask questions. Another option would be to announce the sermon topic ahead of time, and invite congregants to submit questions they may have that the pastor can refer to in the course of the sermon.

Some pastors are also coordinating with Sunday School and Bible study classes to preach on a special series that would allow the small group to discuss and interact with the pastor's message. This is very reminiscent of the success and popularity seen by Saddleback Church's *Purpose Driven Life* series, where all of a church's congregation was studying the same thing, both in corporate worship and in the small group setting. (For an example of a church setting where the sermon topic and small groups studies are intentionally coordinated, see "Preaching the Big Idea" in the July-August 2007 issue of *Preaching*.)

### **Ministry vs. overhead**

With church facilities growing bigger and better and programming involving more high-tech planning and implementation, the expenses for operating a church can be high. In most congregations, more than half of the church's income goes towards paying staff members and covering internal costs, like the light and water bills. Too often the 80/20 principle applies—80 percent toward operations, 20 percent towards missions and ministry.

One argument for house churches is that they don't have the overhead that traditional churches must deal with, so their ratio can be flipped—with 20 percent going toward

operational costs and 80 percent going toward ministry. The home is volunteered, the leadership is voluntary and so the tithes and offerings collected can go towards the specific ministries that the house church wishes to support. Then again, there is little data to tell us what such groups actually contribute and where those funds are directed.

And despite the assertion that traditional churches give little toward ministry outside their own walls, that is not always the case. Many churches have a commitment to investing a substantial portion of their giving in ministry. Huffman points out that if a church is committed to missions, they will make it a point to make sure that money goes towards ministry. His church, for example, makes it a point that 25 percent of all its income goes towards missions. "We have slim years where it's difficult and it would have been easy by taking that 25 percent but we paid that first to hold us accountable."

### **Finding common ground**

Larry Kreider, founder of Dove Christian Fellowship in Lancaster, Penn., and author of *Starting a House Church*, said that when he speaks at pastors' conferences he encourages churches to allow willing members to start house churches as a connected satellite to their church.

Kreider points to the benefits of multiplying churches by citing a Fuller Seminary study. "They found if a church is 10 years old or older, it takes 85 people to lead one to Christ. If a church is three years or younger, it takes three people to lead one to Christ. The best way to reach people is to plant a church."

He compares the current house church movement to the growing homeschool movement.

"Twenty years ago, almost no one homeschooled—you were crazy if you did," said Kreider. "Today, a third of the kids are homeschooled. Ten years down the road, house church networking will be as common place as a megachurch or community church."

And just like the homeschool movement, Kreider believes more resources will be needed for house church participants and leadership. He sees the ideal situation as having house churches connected to local churches to keep continuous training going, and the conventional church and house church working together to serve.

"House church isn't better," said Kreider. "It's just another way to do it."

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