

BY ROBERT FITTS
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THE CASE FOR HOUSE CHURCHES

***“Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus.
Greet also the church that meets at their house.”***

Romans 16:3

***“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.”***

I Cor. 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.”***

Philemon 1-2

From these scriptures it is clear that the early church met in homes. They did not have church buildings. Such buildings did not appear until the year 232 A.D. In those early days they were not called “house churches” They were “the Church” that met in the house of someone. It is notable that the most explosive period of church growth in history, until recently, took place during those early years.

However, right now, in China, there is an unprecedented movement that even surpasses the growth of the early church and this unparalleled revival is a house church movement. The following 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 and 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. When I was in Hong

Kong not long ago, Jonathan Chao, founder of the Chinese Church Research Center, told me how the Chinese revival is being spread by young people, 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 while the younger Christians go on to reach the next village. Chinese pastors and teachers don’t have financial impediments to spreading the Christian message: they live with the peasant farmers in each new area and don’t 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 and that which attended the early church in the book of Acts had something in common: they were both a house church movement. This same kind of growth is seen in other countries today where church buildings are not allowed, as we saw in the John Amstutz letter.

The principle, simply expressed, is that the growth of the church in any given area, will be in direct proportion to the number of obstacles that we allow to hinder the planting of new churches. From my experience in both planting and pastoring house churches I see some definite advantages to this approach to church planting and 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 won’t need a pulpit or pews or hymn books or a piano. You can do without a baptistry, a Sunday School and a youth pastor. You won’t have to belong to a denomination or be incorporated or meet on Sundays or have a church bulletin or meet in the same place every week.

You won’t have to have a sign with the name of your church on it. It won’t need a name. In fact, you don’t even have to call it a “church” as long as you know that it

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is “the church, which is His Body”. None of the above is bad or wrong, but neither are they essential. The apostle Paul used none of the above in his church-planting ministry. We have left the simplicity of the New Testament and added so many extras, which are really not essential, that it has become more and more difficult to start a new church.

Ray Williams, a close personal friend, has been a missionary in Mexico for over 30 years and has been instrumental in starting scores of churches out of which hundreds more have been birthed. He told me recently that he once started a church in a wheat field. That church has grown, and out of it have come a multitude of other churches, each with a church planting vision. We make it too complex. God is calling us back to simplicity and ease of multiplication.

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A 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, but the dress code was completely out of our reach. Some people do not come to our churches today because we have set the standard of dress too high and made church a “formal” event. Many who will not attend a formal church, will attend a house church. It is more relaxed with a casual, family setting.

In his book, *Understanding Church Growth*, Dr. Donald McGavran lists Eight Keys To Church Growth In Cities. The very first one gives us his assessment of the value and importance of planting and multiplying house churches. He states,

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

First, emphasize house churches. When the Church begins to grow in cities among non-Christians, each congregation must soon find a place to assemble. The congregation should meet in the most natural surroundings, to which non-Christians can come with the greatest ease and where the converts themselves 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, considered by many to be the foremost authority on church growth today, 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 vision now being adopted by mission leaders worldwide.

A church that divides in order to multiply will experi-

“The best method under heaven for evangelism is church planting.”

ence addition. A church that has its focus only on addition will tend to bog down and stagnate. Our goal has too often been to try to make one very large congregation rather than to multiply congregations. We cannot say that God would never lead anyone to build a very large congregation, however, the Body of Christ in any city will increase much more rapidly by multiplying congregations than it will by seeking to build a few super churches. We praise God for the super churches. We pray for them we minister in them, we bless them. It is not “us and them.” It is US! The whole Body of Christ belongs to all of us and we belong to each other!

HOUSE CHURCHES FACILITATE TRAINING OF PASTORS & LEADERS

It has long been understood by educators that the best method of training is still the apprentice method, which is “one on one, hands on training” such as 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. House churches will enable us to train pastors to actually do the work of pastoring while they are under the supervision of a more experienced pastor. They will

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grow as the church grows under their leadership. 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.

the week is seldom mentioned at all and never is it emphasized as a special day set aside for worship. The apostle Paul discouraged a "special day" mentality in his writings.

"You are observing special days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you." (Galatians 4:10-11)

Of course many of these house churches will be led by pastors-in-training who will have regular jobs and will pastor a house church as time permits. While the honor of a livable income should go to those who are giving full time to the work, it is also true that those pastors who serve part time should also receive similar honor through love gifts and some remuneration from tithes and offerings to offset expenses and to encourage them in the work of the ministry. "The workman is worthy of his hire." (whether part time or full time) On the other hand, men should not wait until they can be freed from a full time job before they begin to serve as pastors. The apostle Paul worked with his hands often, not only to meet his own needs, but also the needs of those who travelled with him.

"You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:34-35)

HOUSE CHURCHES CAN SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF GROWTH

Some of our congregations have grown so large that they have to build bigger buildings or 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 and sending off two or three families to start a house church in that section of the city. The most life-giving thing a church can do is to have a baby. I have seen churches die because of a spirit of possessiveness in the leadership. God will bless the

people who are continually giving away everything that God gives them. Jesus said, "Give and it shall be given to you." A giving church is a growing church.

Michael Green, Principal of St. John's College of Nottingham, England, in his address before the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974 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 they seem all-important to many Christians; their upkeep consumes the money and interest of the members, often plunges them into debt, and isolates them from those who do not go to church. Indeed, even the word has changed meaning. 'Church' no longer means a company of people, as it did in New Testament times. These days it means a building."*

The fastest growing movements in history have always been those that have not bogged down under ponderous organizational structures and have focused on essentials without wavering.

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HOUSE CHURCHES ARE ECONOMICAL

A house church will be able to channel almost all of its finances into missions and mercy ministries. Some of our house churches in Texas channel 93% of their offerings into local benevolence and foreign missions. There may be some minor expenses, but since the meetings are held in houses all building expenses are avoided.

Meetings can be held on other days or nights as well as Sundays. Nothing in the New Testament says that Sunday is the time for church. As a matter of fact, the pattern in the book of Acts is that they met daily. The first day of