

## Why House Churches?

The purpose of this booklet is to explain the house church, study its development, and see how this can be applied today. We hope that this will answer any questions you have. In this study we will look at the following questions:

### **Question #1: What is a house church?**

In the New Testament, the house is where the church met. Today the difference between a "house church" and a "sanctuary church" is the place of meeting. Each is able to fulfill the commands of our Lord concerning the church.

### **Question #2: What is a house church like?**

The Bible describes the church as "the family of God." A house church is like a family. The church must have a Biblical understanding of the family if it can function in this way. The church family should be an extension of the household family. The same dynamics of communication, commitment, intimacy, growth, participation, caring, sharing and responsibility in our household family overflow into our church family relationships. If our household family relationships are not what they should be, our church family won't function properly. Because the house church acts like a family, it is easier to recognize and correct these problems.

One of the greatest challenges to the church today is good communication. The house church requires us to communicate. It is not easy to hide from someone if you have to sit directly across from him. If a disagreement occurs we often have a natural tendency to harbor bitterness and anger. Usually you could just go to another part of the building and not have to see the other person. In a house church, though, the relationships in the group are greatly affected if these divisions aren't bridged. The Bible says that God expects His family to be a loving, caring community. We are "to grow up in every way into Him who is the Head, into Christ from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love." In a house church, good communication among the members illustrates our loving relationships with each other and with a loving God.

### **Question #3: How does size affect the quality of community?**

Size is the real issue. The church should be relational, personal, intimate, and committed. It should be like a family. It is no coincidence that the Bible uses family terms to describe our relationships to God and each other (father, mother, brothers sisters, son, daughters, child). Size definitely affects a group. Social scientists have shown that smaller groups encourage more participation, closer interaction, more accountability, and closer relationships. This is nothing new - our Lord worked with only twelve men that he could build into a community. Spiritual growth happens best in an intimate environment. This atmosphere is fostered by face-to face accountability which speaks of size.

If one member is not present or leaves for some reason, the church feels her absence. This is a positive factor - every member is crucial. Because each one is so important, all are responsible to minister to each other. When this kind of commitment is realized, the church becomes a cohesive group welded together with love. If this commitment is not sustained, a house church goes out of existence very fast. Growth is frustrated if the group is exclusive, self-satisfied, or becomes apathetic. The group must be encouraged to reach out from the very start. Without this as a foundation, any structure built on top, whether a sanctuary church or a house church, will eventually crumble. In most house churches, the members write their desire to form new house churches into their covenant.

### **Question #4: How do house churches work?**

It is the responsibility of the members of the house church to shepherd each other. The body must lend support to those who struggle, to those who are wounded, and to those who want to grow. Members must be willing to give and receive admonition. Each person can thus be assured that even in the worst of times

others will remain committed to loving and caring for him or her. These relationships will not be shattered and split apart by conflict, but will remain glued together. Each person needs to know that in spite of difficulties others will remain faithful to him or her. The house church then becomes an extension of a household family, which is committed to holding together each family member.

Because a house church is small, people develop meaningful relationships more easily. They care for each other like they're members of the same family. This kind of participation encourages each person to take part in all the chores. There are no observers in a household. In a house church, not only do members observe and receive instruction, but also everyone actively participates in every ministry of the church. The church in the home has a high commitment level. Participants quickly become seriously involved or they drop out. The house church fosters mutual commitment. In this context people minister to each other concerning everyday problems: family members examine how the Bible speaks to their everyday concerns. The Bible is our authority as we deal with real-life situations in a caring family environment. Some of our meetings look like family "pow-wows" around the dinner table where we discuss the day's problems and look for solutions.

#### **Question #5: How do house churches encourage personal growth?**

When a group is small enough to meet in a home it is small enough to be considered family. In our culture the family unit is under siege. We need to return to biblical values for both our household families and our church families. The house church affords a unique opportunity to experience family relationships. The household churches of the New Testament times had an overwhelming effect on believers. There was a need for each member to be involved in the lives of the others. By doing this they were able to influence the whole world for Christ. One first-century person opposed to the faith described Christians as "men who have turned the whole world upside down".

Within this framework there is a unique opportunity to discover and develop our spiritual gifts. When an atmosphere of every-member-ministry is encouraged, each member becomes a minister. Small groups integrate personal growth and ministry by allowing the whole church family to minister. Every man, woman, and child is held accountable to the group as a whole. Each member, who otherwise might be mere attendee, is responsible for the well being of the others. The house church develops a sense of being the body of Christ, a gathering of "priests" with gifts for everyone's edification.

#### **Question #6: How do you get leaders for house churches?**

The house church influences the recognition and development of leaders. Leaders identify and encourage others with leadership gifts. Because the house church is so small, men are readily recognized for their leadership ability, trained, and put into positions of responsibility. Ongoing training by the leaders of other house churches and by church planters should alleviate any problems developing capable leadership.

#### **Question #7: How are the offerings used?**

Because house churches don't need to purchase an expensive building, enormous financial overhead has been eliminated. The church has an opportunity to participate uninhibited in the relief of the saints and in the ministry of church planting. The need for supported leadership may become an issue, but by coordinating with other interdependent churches, this support could be raised by each church sharing the financial responsibility.

#### **Question #8: How widespread is the house church movement?**

The house church is a worldwide phenomenon. Billy Graham has said, "at various church conferences and retreats the emphasis is increasing toward the house church in many parts of the world." Observers note that the church in China is growing at a phenomenal rate. Mostly, the Chinese meet in house churches. Jonathan Chao of the China Church Research Center estimates that there are between 25 and 50 million believers in these house churches. There are also reports of small house gatherings in many other countries. Christianity Today cites reports from North Korea of tiny gatherings of believers meeting in homes. One estimate puts the number of house churches there at over 1000. Reports from Vietnam show that Christ's body continues to grow, mostly in small groups.

The Full Gospel Central Church in Seoul numbers over 600,000 and meets in small home groups. In Mexico City, Galo Vasquez, director of Yision Evangelizadora Latinoamericana expects to see 10,000 self-

functioning house churches established by the year 2000. The house church has emerged in Europe, particularly in England. The Ichthus Fellowship is a large church made up of smaller house churches in London. Robert Banks, author of Paul's Idea of Community, has been involved with seeing house churches established and developed in Canberra and Sydney, Australia.

House churches are being formed in the United States as well. Del Birkey, author of The House Church, has been involved with the development of house churches in Illinois for more than a decade. Lois Barrett, author of Building the House Church has been involved with the development of house churches in Pennsylvania and Kansas, The Grace Fellowship Church in Baltimore, Maryland, states, "house churches are the background of our church. To be part of our church is to be part of a house group." In the Serendipity Training Manual for Groups, there is a listing of churches that have adopted small house groups as a means of growth.

We believe that the house church is a viable approach, which can facilitate the expansion of the church here in New England, the USA and the world. It is our belief that through these small house churches, communities can be reached for Christ much in the same way that communities were reached in the first century. We invite you to join us in this exciting adventure as we walk hand-in-hand with millions of other believers all over the world.

For further reading:

Del Birkey, THE HOUSE CHURCH.

Lois Barrett, BUILDING THE HOUSE CHURCH.

Robert Banks, PAUL'S IDEA OF COMMUNITY.

John Moore and Ken Neff, THE NEW TESTAMENT BLUEPRINT FOR THE CHURCH.

Vernard Eller, THE OUTWARD BOUND.

Paul Abbott and Ron Simkins, CHARTING A REVOLUTION.

John Kyle, URBAN MISSION.

Ron Trudinger, CELLS FOR LIVING.

Robert Coleman, THE POWER OF SMALL GROUPS IN REVIVAL

Dietrich Bonhoffer, THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Michael Griffiths, GOD'S FORGETFUL PILGRIMS.

Raymond Ortlund, LET THE CHURCH BE THE CHURCH.

Abraham Malherbe, SOCIAL ASPECTS OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY.

Floyd Filson, THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EARLY HOUSE CHURCHES.

J.I. Packer, KEEP IN STEP WITH THE SPIRIT.