

TOWARD A 'REINCARNATION' OF CHURCH IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY:
THE RE-EMERGENCE OF 'HOUSE CHURCH'

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INDEX

NATURE OF DISSERTATION

SUMMARY OF DISSERTATION

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| I. LAYING FOUNDATIONS | P. 8 |
| II. MAJOR FACTORS FAVOURING THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE HOUSE CHURCH TODAY | P. 49 |
| III. HOUSE CHURCHES, THE BEST REFLECTION OF THE BIBLICAL MATERIAL RELATING TO THE CHURCH | P. 87 |
| IV. HOUSE CHURCHES, THE MOST RELEVANT EXPRESSION OF CHRIST'S BODY IN OUR WORLD TODAY | P. 199 |
| V. HOUSE CHURCHES, THE MOST EFFECTIVE STRUCTURE TO FULFILL CHRIST'S MANDATE IN THE WORLD | P. 246 |
| VI. HOUSE CHURCH ADVANTAGES AND PRACTICALITIES – THE WAY FORWARD | P. 310 |

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

NATURE OF DISSERTATION

Please note that this dissertation is primarily a research of LITERATURE on the chosen subject.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

1.

This dissertation commences with FOUNDATIONS. How have the spiritual revivals/ renewals of the past connected with house groups/house churches? What are scholars saying about renewal today and the way it affects church structures?

We then define house churches and differentiate them from 'small groups' and 'cell groups' in the contemporary church context.

We trace the history of house churches, from its OT connection, the time of our Lord's earthly ministry, through the apostolic period and the centuries following, the Protestant Reformation, the classic 18th century spiritual awakenings until the 21st century.

We show how house churches have operated in homes, cities and nations. The chapter closes on a note of realism with regard to the house church today.

2.

In this chapter we examine some of the main CONTRIBUTORY FACTORS TO THE DEMISE OF THE TRADITIONAL CHURCH AND THE RE-EMERGENCE OF HOUSE CHURCH TODAY. Some are societal, others political and ecclesiastical. We come to four major conclusions re contributing factors:

- The first contributing factor is the meltdown of the 'institutional church' worldwide. Here we have included: (a) the effect of postmodernism on the institutional church – negatively and positively; (b) some local opinions on why many church members feel alienated from their churches (institutional).
- The second factor is the meltdown of the family worldwide.

- The third factor is the 'community' crisis in Christendom today.
- The fourth factor is the political and religious persecution of the missional church in many places of the world.

3.

We assert that house churches ARE THE BEST REFLECTION OF THE BIBLICAL MATERIAL RELATING TO THE CHURCH.

We lay foundations for a 'theology of church structure.'

We examine carefully the influence of the Jewish synagogue (and home) (its life and worship) on the first-century church.

We build on a biblical-exegetical base for the church and house church in particular, looking at the Scriptures in general and then at four key-passages of the Book of Acts. Concerning the Book of Acts we note how strongly it links with the Gospels (Luke's especially) and their portrayal of Jesus' life and ministry-strategy, including the rôle of the *oikos* (extended family) in the expansion of His kingdom.

Logically we next ask, how does the church, including the house church, relate to the kingdom of Christ and culture in general? Following on, what would a biblical and renewed church look like today?

We close with basic hypotheses as to 'an ecclesiology of house church.'

4.

We assert that HOUSE CHURCHES ARE THE MOST RELEVANT EXPRESSION OF CHRIST'S BODY IN OUR WORLD TODAY.

This is born out not only by the Bible and theology, but by sociology, anthropology, etc. Because we cannot consider house church in a vacuum (i.e. as if other significant forms of church did not exist in more recent church history), we have to consider those other newer shapes of church which claim to be especially relevant today. Thus we explain and assess the 'cell church model,' the 'emerging church' model, the 'organic church' model, churches with 'small groups' and the 'second apostolic church' model. In each case we find the house church more biblical, practical and relevant in the 21st century.

5.

We assert that HOUSE CHURCHES ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE STRUCTURE TO FULFIL CHRIST'S MANDATE IN THE WORLD.

The principles of church structure must be looked at in a biblical and radical new way, for it is absolutely basic to the effectiveness of the church in ways not fully appreciated by the traditional/institutional church at large.

We give practical examples of the effectiveness of the house church, for example in: missionality; societal transformation; leadership development; family transformation; effective church discipline.

Next we carefully set out the most common *objections* to the house church structure today, and answer these as honestly as possible.

Because of the importance of 'community' in the church today, we conclude this section by highlighting some lessons from 'intentional communities' past and present.

6.

We lay out THE FINAL CONCLUSIONS/OUTCOMES of the dissertation, believing the house church is the best approach today and in the immediate future.

We summarise the major advantages of the house church today.

We also deal with some basic principles and practicalities in connection with planting house churches.

We include a practical survey of typical house church formats, 'Services,' networks, in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metro as well as the Western Cape.

We end with some brief comments regarding the need for openness and renewal at all times, the critical rôle of youth and the poor at the forefront of ministry [these dominate the population of the world by far], handling opposition to the house church idea, the lateness of the day concerning church structure, etc. All this we pursue with realism as to the cost and yet with hope in the exalted Christ.

TEN KEY WORDS

- Bible
- Church/house church
- Jesus Christ
- Incarnation
- Structure
- Institutionalism
- Family
- Community
- Mission
- Kingdom

PROLOGUE

Firstly, the Church of Jesus Christ should always be examining herself and adapting to necessary changes and divine opportunities, without compromising ‘the message once delivered. *“A church which pitches its tents without constantly looking for new horizons, which does not continually strike camp, is being untrue to its calling.... [We must] play down our longing for certainty, accept what is risky, live by improvisation and experiment.”* (Küng, cited in Frost & Hirsch, 2003: preface)

Secondly, there is need at the outset to emphasise that one cannot treat the subject of the re-emergent house church in a narrow, isolated way. We have to see our subject in the broader context of our times, contemporary theology and church practice, new forms of church, the future church, etc [Padilla, cited in Frost & Hirsch 2004, p.83, has said that without contextualization, the gospel is irrelevant – may the writer add, so is the church].¹

Thirdly, the pressures and challenges faced by traditional/institutional churches are the same as those being faced by house churches and other ‘newer’ forms of church.

Fourthly, those looking in this dissertation for a dogmatic defence of the house church as a ‘model’ with absolutely nothing to learn from other approaches, will be disappointed. Furthermore, house church is not just another church ‘model’ (so espoused by Western Christianity these days, merely to be implemented with the assurance of sure success) but is essentially ‘A WAY OF BEING/LIFE,’ as we follow in the footsteps of the Lord of the church, ‘*the way, the truth and the life*’ (Jn. 14:6).

¹ Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp. 83ff,88) give a working definition of contextualization, viz. “The dynamic process whereby the constant message of the gospel interacts with specific, relative human situations...” They also give some of the reasons for contextualization, e.g. Christ’s contextualization of Himself in the incarnation; so also the first Christians as indicated, e.g., in Acts 17; because it works; etc.

CHAPTER I LAYING FOUNDATIONS

1. RENEWAL AND THE HOUSE CHURCH....
2. WHAT ARE HOUSE CHURCHES? (HOUSE CHURCHES DIFFER FROM SMALL GROUPS AND CELL GROUPS)
3. THE HOUSE CHURCH STORY....
4. CHURCH IN THE HOME, CITY AND WORLD....
5. THE IDEAL AND THE REAL....
6. CONCLUSION...

1. RENEWAL AND THE HOUSE CHURCH...

1.1.

Renewal in house churches and similar groups.

In the nineteen eighties already theologians and church practitioners were saying that spiritual *renewal* was to a large extent taking place in *house churches* in all cultures, rather than in conventional, traditional churches (Birkey, 1988, pp.11,13ff,22,32-33,56, 63,76ff,115ff). In 1939 Filson pointed out the critical importance of NEW TESTAMENT HOUSE CHURCHES (cited in Birkey, 1988, p.40). Filson concluded that the use of the house church was a strategic missional action: he believed that a major objective of the apostle Paul in a new city was the winning of a household which could serve as the nucleus and centre of his work in its further expansion.

1.2.

Small groups, the best hope for renewal.

Snyder (cited in Birkey, 1988, p.65) in 1975 recognized small groups as the best hope for renewal in the church. He (Snyder, 1996, p.34) was encouraged by the fact that even in a technological, globalised age the gospel was ever relevant and making progress

through the house church movement, revivals in different places, co-operation between Roman Catholics and Protestants, etc.

1.3.

Neglect of the house church in history.

Hadaway, Wright and DuBose (1987, pp.35,184ff) in 1987 stated that the importance of the house church in history had largely been overlooked, although it had been a PERSISTENT FORM in every age of Christendom. The re-emergence of house church therefore was not a passing fad but rather a direct response to problems in a complex and mass society.

1.4.

Small groups in South Africa.

In 1995 Hendriks provided factual, statistical data of the church in decline in South Africa (1995, p.17ff)² - overall these indicated the growth and decline of Christianity in the country, as well as in the different population groups and denominations.³ The facts at that time [the terminology here reflects the SA political context of the time] indicated the serious decline of membership of the 'white' and 'coloured' population groups as well as the membership of 'mainline' denominations. Significant was the growth of the faith in the black African population group as well as IN THOSE CHURCHES THAT UTILISED SMALL GROUP PRINCIPLES.

Commenting on the growth of the African Independent Churches, Hendriks said (1995, p.26),

"The fact that Africans, traditionally a tribal people, are *relationship-orientated* [I am italicising those aspects of church life that have been/are very pertinent in the house church movement], functioning in a system of *extended families*, must be kept in mind. The process of urbanization was highly disruptive, especially because of the political and economic system forced on them (apartheid, forced removals, migratory labour, capitalism,

² This survey includes detailed graphs, pie-charts, tables, etc.

³ In an RSG broadcast of the program 'Kollig op die Kerk' at 8:10 am on Sunday 11/10/2009, Dr. Piet Muller indicated that in 1996 already the Dutch Reformed Church in SA was conducting more funerals than baptisms.

individualism, shanty towns and so on). However, the African ethos of the *extended family*, of tribal *unity and care*, was *reincarnated* to a certain extent in the African Independent Churches. The AIC's are churches among the poorest of the poor, operating without any external financial aid. They have an *ethos of helping one another in all walks of life*, allowing their members to survive under harsh conditions. They develop stronger *family ties* and work at *the upliftment of their people*. This approach augurs well for the future. The West, unfortunately, was too slow in discovering that its intellectual culture has a very negative impact because humans are not merely intellectual beings but also have *feelings, emotions and intuition*. *Fellowship and mutual concern are basic elements of a true and meaningful religion.*"

Commenting on the growth of small-group churches, including in the AIC's, Hendriks stated that the intimacy and personal nature of this approach had been a strong growth factor (1995, p.27). He added that the importance of small groups as primary socializing units, as faith communities, could not be stressed enough (1995, p.31).

1.5.

Early church growth was house church growth, in networks.

More recently, Simson (1998, p.31,40) has reminded us that the growth of the church in the first three centuries of its highly effective existence was largely in a house church network format. He quotes Hopkins of the Anglican Church-Planting Network in England as saying "The West has compressed celebration into congregation, and forgotten the homes." He mentions Anglican Robert Warren speaking of the 'inherited mode of church' and an 'emerging mode,' a new – or possibly very old – form of church re-emerging according to New Testament patterns.

1.6.

The once-and-future church.

Australian theologians R and J Banks (1998, p.1-2) write that something new is stirring in the church – there is a re-alignment in its membership and STRUCTURES. To envision the church of the future we must recall the church at its beginning – we are looking for the ‘once-and-future church.’ One major side of this ‘quiet revolution’ is that all over the world the church is coming home to smaller, face-to-face gatherings of Christians.

“Through the centuries Christians have occasionally returned to the humble quarters from which the church began; now people of God in many countries are deciding it is time to do so again. Christians are gathering in their houses and apartments to sing and pray together, to provide mutual support, to eat a common meal, and to learn from one another” (1998, p.2).

1.7.

A return to ‘simple church.’

Many are today speaking of a return to ‘simple church,’ most in some connection with the house church movement – this is a challenge we cannot avoid in all the complexities of modern life.

Moltmann (1978, p.9) wrote that ‘simplicity’ (i.e. relating to our relationship with God and our neighbour, our lifestyle, and certainly to our understanding of the Scriptures and the church) is the highest challenge to theology, theology being inseparable from the congregation. Moltmann made a valuable point which flies in the face of the often complex church institutionalism of our time.

1.8.

Disillusionment with church size and ‘success.’

Very recently Barna (2006, p.19-20,24), statistician and student of change in the USA church, has written of a ‘single trend’ redefining faith and the church in the USA, the

disillusionment of many with the obsession with church size and ‘successful churches,’ etc. He outlines seven core passions of the New Testament Church (Acts 2, 4, 5), including COMMUNITY, RELATIONSHIPS AND ‘FAMILY FAITH: “In a very real sense, the home was the early Church – supplemented by larger gatherings in the Temple and elsewhere, but never replaced by what took place in the homes of believers.”

1.9.

Traditional, evangelical churches will not carry the future.

In his latest publication Simson (2006, pp.2,35-36) gives reasons why he believes traditional evangelicalism will not carry the future:

“More and more Christian leaders... are saying we are not prepared to face the issues of the 21st Century – neither economically, politically, culturally (postmodernity), nor spiritually. One symptom of this is the burgeoning burn-out rates and sabbaticals (of leaders). We live in a time of the greatest upheaval of Christendom. Constantinian Christianity is divided like never before into some thirty nine thousand denominations, ⁴ and, in the West, shrinks in spite of (because of?) its hectic activity. If there is any growth at all, it is found outside of the West.”

Simson estimates that between 1996 and 2006, some 300,000 house churches have been born around the world, and this figure excludes the house churches of China.

⁴ Grudem (1994, p.879) asks, “Have the reasons for separation into different organizations and denominations always been proper ones? Although there have almost always been strong theological differences in major church divisions, one fears that too often, especially in more recent history, the real motives for beginning or maintaining separation have been selfish ones, and that John Calvin may have been correct in saying, ‘Pride or self-glorification is the cause and starting point of all such controversies, when each person, claiming for himself more than he is entitled to have, is eager to have others in his power.’ Moreover, he says, ‘Ambition has been, and still is, the mother of all errors, of all disturbances and sects.’ In the mid-twentieth century the ecumenical movement sought greater organizational unity among denominations, but without noteworthy success. It by no means received wholehearted approval or support from evangelicals. On the other hand, since the 1960’s, the growth of the charismatic movement across almost all denominational lines, the rise of neighborhood Bible study and prayer groups, and a greatly diminished doctrinal awareness among laypeople, have brought about a remarkable increase in actual unity of fellowship – even between Protestants and Catholics – at the local level.” (Grudem goes on to mention other groups who practise policies of *no cooperation* and *no personal fellowship* with parties other than themselves, with obvious damage to the cause of church unity in the biblical sense) In this context, the writer, a strong proponent of house church today, pleads at the same time that contemporary house churches work in fellowship with other Bible-based/progressive churches as far as possible, without compromising its prophetic voice for a better way of being/doing church.

1.10.

Emerging indigenous faith communities.

Australian missiologists, Frost and Hirsch (2003, p.26ff,211), are supportive of the emerging 'indigenous faith communities' which in their view provide the best hermeneutic of the gospel as they simply live it out. It is the day of the 'smaller, missional unit.'

1.11.

The swing to mini/house churches.

Kreider and McClung (2007, p.9) indicate that some religious historians believe that house churches represent "the next wave of evangelical worship, after the boom in the mega-churches that occurred during the 1980's and 1990's." They cite *Time*⁵ (2007, p.9) describing "evangelicals... abandoning mega churches for mini churches, based in their own living rooms."

Kreider and McClung go on to cite USA futurist Joiner (2007, p.184) as follows:

"A revolution is coming to Christianity that will eclipse the Reformation in the sweeping changes that it brings to the church. When it comes, the present structure and organization of the church will cease to exist, and the way that the world defines Christianity will be radically changed. What is coming will not be a change of doctrine, but a change in basic church life. The changes that are coming will be so profound that it will be hard to relate the present form of church structure and government to what is coming. The new dynamic of church life will overshadow the Great Awakenings in their social impact, transforming cities and even whole nations. It will bring a sweeping sense of righteousness and justice to the whole earth. The future leaders of the church are now being given a vision of a radical New Testament Christianity being restored to the earth."⁶

⁵ *Time* of March 6th 2006.

⁶ As we will constantly be talking about church as affected by **MODERNITY and POSTMODERNITY**, some very basic definitions of these terms are in order. According to Codrington and Swartz (1999, p.120), *modernity* is basically "the world view which drew the line between science and religion, faith and

2. SO WHAT ARE HOUSE CHURCHES?

2.1.

According to R and J Banks (1998, pp.6,22):

“Home-churching involves a face-to-face meeting of adults and children who are committed to developing ‘a common life in Christ’ [I Jn. 1:1-7; Gal. 6:2, 10; also Bonhoeffer’s *The Life Together*, chapter 1 on *Community* (personal comment)]. They meet weekly in a house, apartment, or other convivial space. More important than their setting is their mutual care for and accountability to one another. As an extended family they desire to sing, pray, learn, share, love, play, and have a meal (which is also their Lord’s Supper) *together*. Through their mutual ministry to one another they learn to identify and use the gifts God has given them, and they are therefore more confident in engaging in mission through various individual ministries in their homes, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and wider communities. While they view themselves as church, they also recognize the importance of congregating regularly with a larger group of God’s people.”

It is important to remember that no two house churches are exactly alike. Sometimes the differences are relatively small, sometimes quite considerable. There are STABLE ELEMENTS in all these gatherings – singing, praying, learning, sharing, and participating in the meal – but the FORM these take and the way they are combined is FLEXIBLE. Much depends on the background and composition of the group, their gifts and maturity, the age range of children, and the forms of Christianity that have influenced those who belong to them.

superstition, truth and veracity. It demanded technical, scientific answers to questions of faith and science, with proofs and evidence. Modernism required that everything be rational, observable and repeatable... Modernism has ruled supreme in Western thought for the last 500 years.” On the other hand they define *postmodernity* as a reaction to modernism and as a direct descendant of the late nineteenth century existentialism, with the affective taking precedence over the cognitive. “It is characterized by freedom of choice, rejection of creeds, and a complete agnosticism with regards to truth.” It doesn’t like definitions and formulae and everything must connect with life experience. Not having answers is quite acceptable. It is very pragmatic – ‘It must work.’ It is the worldview that defines our present generation to a large extent.

2.2.

House church according to Foster (cited in D.Jones, 1989, p.27):

A house church consists of “persons, usually fifteen to twenty in number, (who) form an intentional community, conceived as small church which is part of the larger whole of the church; the community meets together for the mutual healing, sustaining and guiding of its members, for celebration, fellowship and for mobilizing energies for service beyond the house church. Thus the house church as a part shares fuller in the broader aims of the Christian church as a whole.”

2.3.

House church according to DAWN.⁷

DAWN (Kreider & McClung, 2007, p.26), a ‘saturation’ church-planting ministry puts it well:

“The house church is a structure that reflects the core nature of the church... It is a spiritual, enlarged, organic family... It is inherently participator and not consumer-provider driven. Its responsibility structure is also very simple and effective: ⁸ individual house churches are fathered by elders, who in turn are equipped by itinerant servants like those in the fivefold ministry (Eph. 4:11-13). They often relate to a regional spiritual father-figure, who, through his humble apostolic passion and vision, often becomes something like a ‘pillar of the church,’ an anchor-place for a regional movement that fills its cities and villages with the presence of Christ... The church is the people of God. The church, therefore, was and is at home where people are at home: in ordinary houses.”

⁷ ‘DISCIPLING A WHOLE NATION.’

⁸ In 1974 already Gene Getz (1974, p.157) in his *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, was pleading for a *simplification of church*. He urged keeping organization simple, organizing to meet needs, organizing to serve biblical objectives, etc. “If organization is to be functional, it must be as simple as possible. Complicated organizational patterns frequently become ‘ends’ in themselves.”

2.4.

House church according to A. Jones (2006, p.3-4):

Some within the house church movement consider the term 'house church' to be a **misnomer**, asserting that the main issue for Christians who practise their faith in this manner is not the house (so much) but the type of meeting that takes place; other titles which may be used to describe this movement are 'simple church,' 'relational church,' 'primitive church,' 'organic church,' etc. New Zealand house church enthusiast, A. Jones (2006, p.3-4), writes

"I saw a house church network in Central Europe where none of the churches met in homes. People there cannot afford a house. Clubs? Yes. Coffee Shops? Yes. Apartments? Sometimes. Cole (2005) called them 'Simple Churches'... I like that. 'Organic Church?' 'Micro Church?' ... more work needs to be done here."

And what about the rapid movement of monastic structures in the evangelical church in the UK and USA? These intentional residential communities, many of which are large houses filled with young people discovering church, are (often) more house-based than the house churches and yet we do not call them 'house churches.'

2.5.

House churches DIFFER FROM 'SMALL GROUPS' and 'CELL GROUPS.'

2.5.1.

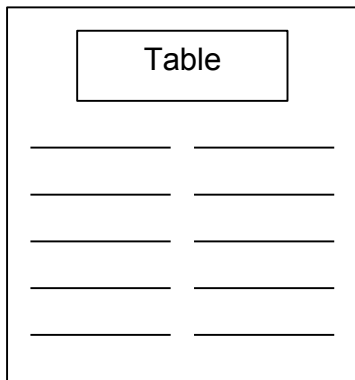
Birkey (1991, p.1) is helpful: "On the contemporary scene, as many as *five kinds of home-based groups* have been identified.⁹ The fundamental distinction is that house churches are *small congregations in their own right* [my emphasis], whereas cell groups are sub-units of a congregation... 'house church' refers to an indigenous and self-

⁹ Taken from Hadaway, Kirk and Dubose (1987, pp.83ff), these include: (1) The Home Bible Study Group (often this group includes more than Bible study, viz. prayer, teaching, fellowship, etc); (2) The Home Fellowship/Share Group (with a strong emphasis on interpersonal relationships and mutual concern); (3) The Home Cell Group (more tightly organized versions of home fellowship/ share groups, based primarily on Yonggi Cho's model); (4) The Base Satellite Group (includes a variety of home groups sponsored by a host church); (5) The House Church (independent and self-contained, not a satellite unit of an institutional host church – house churches often may be federated or voluntarily associated in other ways).

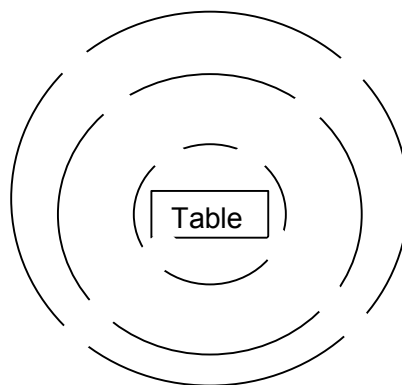
functioning church small enough to gather together in a home or similar surroundings. This, in essence, is also a description of the first-century churches of the New Testament.”

2.5.2.

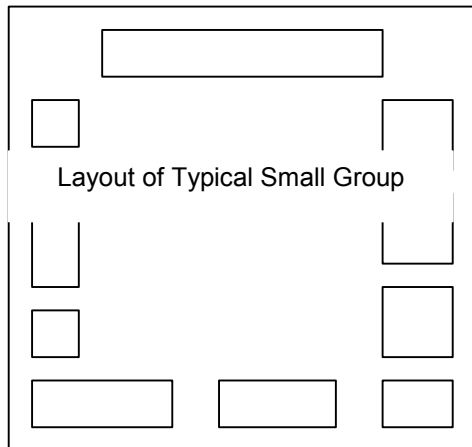
R and J Banks (2004, pp.36-37) provide some **helpful diagrams** to describe the physical lay-out of a traditional congregational meeting, a home-church-based congregational meeting, a typical small group and a typical house church:



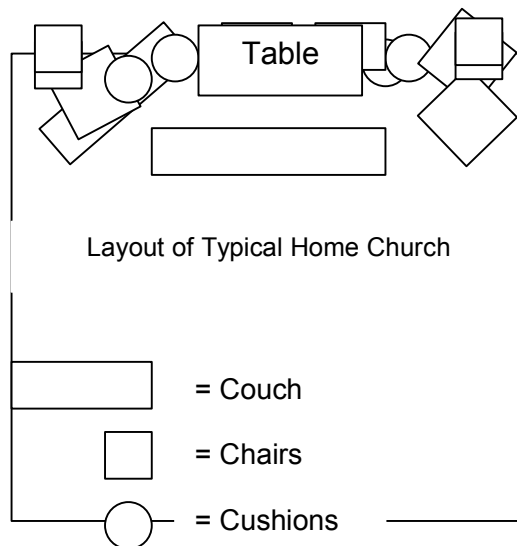
Layout of a Traditional Congregational Meeting



Layout of a Home-Church-Based Congregational Meeting



Layout of Typical Small Group



Layout of Typical Home Church

R and J Banks also clearly distinguish small groups from house churches: small groups have their place but do not encompass all aspects of corporate Christian life and are rarely fundamental to a congregation's life.

3. WHERE DID HOUSE CHURCHES ORIGINATE? THE STORY...

3.1.

The theological/sociological starting-point.

3.1.1.

In a study on the Ephesian Letter, *Unity in Community*, veteran missiologist Wilson (2006, pp.39-40) refers to the **rediscovery of the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of 'community,'** i.e. a loving community of three persons. He sees the postmodern shift as moving us toward a more integrated biblical theology, a new understanding of humanity in terms of social personhood rather than autonomous individuality, etc. The Church is the community where the triune God dwells in unity, and must therefore reflect that unity in intimate community (Eph. 4:1-3; 12-13; 25-32).

[One could argue that this unity which is as intimate as that between husband and wife and between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:32) is basic to the church *and its essential format* as expressed in the Book of Acts and in the Epistles. In other words, house churches have from the start reflected the community of the Trinity in a unique way].

3.1.2.

Sociologists and experts on small groups (Tubbs, Grunland & Reimer, cited in Birkey, 1988, pp.63-65), in their studies on the latter, have isolated **primary and secondary small groups.** A *primary group* is one small enough to be characterized by intimate face-to-face association, a situation in which the individual becomes directly involved in and gains a most complete experience of social unity (we would immediately associate this close relationship with the family). The *secondary group* is larger and more formal – members may know each other only as adherents of the same organization, but do not know each other personally or intimately, and the common focus centres on an

extraneous concern rather than on each other. Applying the above definitions, the **house church** of the first several centuries was obviously a **primary group**, whereas the church that developed from the third century onwards was essentially a *secondary group* (Birkey, 1988, pp.64-65). From a scriptural perspective of church in its essence, the more *primary* form of the first centuries AD explains much of the early church's immediate success as it met from 'home to home.' Long (cited in Birkey, 1988, p.63) wrote, "In the beginning shortly after he created man, God created small groups. God did not populate his world with self-sufficient individuals. Because it wasn't good for man to be alone, God created families. And God worked through family groupings and other forms of small groups to establish his purposes."

[further on in this dissertation we will develop the point of the family being the basic and universal social unit in society as well as in the church].

3.2.

Historically, we consider JESUS and His 'apostolic group.'

3.2.1.

It could well be said that the original small group/house church (in the NT sense) was the one **Jesus** organized and gathered with Him. All along Christ had emphasized the importance of a deeper community and 'being together,' even if it entailed only two or three (Mt. 18:20). Jesus spent three years living and working in fellowship together with a small group of disciples. Coleman (cited in Snyder, 1996, p.87) noted, "He actually spent more time with His disciples than with everybody else in the world put together. He ate with them, slept with them, and talked with them for the most part of His entire active ministry."

These disciples not only learned from Christ but shared a depth of community that was the prototype of early church *koinonia* (Acts 2, etc). (Though the Twelve were all men, Jesus shared deep *koinonia* with a number of women, up to (and maybe beyond) the degree acceptable within the cultural context. The home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus provided one opportunity for this; and Luke 8:2-3 and Mark 15:41 mention other women who shared this deep community with Jesus) (Birkey, 1988, p.63).

3.2.2.

Gill (cited in D. Jones, 1989, p.29) goes further, referring to Jesus' use of homes as **part of His basic missionary strategy** – not only did He minister in homes, but He also sent out the Twelve (Mk. 6) and the Seventy (Lk. 10) with special instructions regarding the home. The new community He had in mind would be established as households turned to God. This then was the fellowship that essentially led to the dynamic church of the Book of Acts. Those first Christians knew an unusual unity, oneness of purpose, common love and mutual sharing – it was an atmosphere, a spiritual environment that grew among them as they prayed, learned and worshiped together in their own homes (Acts 2:42-46; 5:42) (Snyder, 1996, p.87).

3.2.3.

This also the missionary strategy of **the apostle Paul**, who, according to Filson (cited in D. Jones, 1989, p.29), was “no absent-minded theologian who never came down to earth. One thing he had to have was a meeting place. The practical way to obtain one was to win a household with a home large enough to serve as a centre of Christian activity.”

3.2.4.

So also **the apostle John**: Gehring (2004, pp.231ff) emphasises the importance of 2 and 3 John with regard to the house church in apostolic times, for they provide a lucid, concrete illustration of how house churches functioned. For example, they point out the bad example of Diotrephes, leader of a certain house church – although John (‘the elder’) wrote to the church, Diotrephes refused to receive him and did not practise hospitality toward several itinerant Christians from other churches, in fact he expelled from the congregation those who acted differently (2004, p.232). Diotrephes’ behaviour stood in strong contrast to that of Gaius, who had received these visitors and given them hospitality – it appears Gaius had his own house and was thus able to act independently of Diotrephes.¹⁰

¹⁰ Edwards (1999, pp.36-61) describes in detail the apostles’ ‘household strategy’ in the Jerusalem church, Judean and Antioch churches (as a result of Saul’s persecution), and specifically Paul’s ‘household strategy’ in the Gentile churches of Galatia and Europe.

3.2.5.

We here need to enquire about **the rôle of the Jerusalem temple** played in the worship and fellowship of the early church (primarily meeting in homes).

As Snyder (1996, pp.62-64) rightly argues, with the birth of the church the need for a physical tabernacle or temple passed away. There was no longer any one holy place for worship and sacrifice (Jn. 4:20-24), for the sacrifice had already been made, once-for-all. All that was necessary was a place to meet together as the Christian community, and for this the most natural place was the home (Acts 2:46; 5:42). Jewish Christians continued worshipping for a while in the temple, but the practice tapered off and fell away totally with the destruction of the temple in seventy AD (Acts 7:44-48 is pertinent, see especially v. 46-49 (NLT), *David found favor with God and asked for the privilege of building a permanent Temple for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who actually built it. However, the Most High does not live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that?' asks the LORD*). So accustomed to looking for God in stone and mortar, the Jewish leaders of the time failed to recognize God in Jesus when He came in human flesh (Jn. 1:1-11). All this suggests a most basic fact: "Theologically (Snyder, 1996, p.63), the church does not need temples. Church buildings are not essential to the true nature of the church... *The people* are the temple and the tabernacle ... A church building cannot be 'the Lord's House...' (Eph. 2; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:21).

3.2.6.

It is also interesting to note that house churches **networked** trans-locally from the earliest days, maintaining frequent, vital interconnection among themselves. They made use of the comings and goings of the apostles and their associates and many hand-carried letters and oral messages. This networking was nothing like a denominational structure or formalized associations. Neither were these different churches totally independent – the model of the early church was rather that of *interdependence*.

Consider, for example, the networking implications of Acts 20:2-4 and the seven “networkers” (in addition to Paul) identified in this passage. Certainly the term ‘independent church’ would have made no sense in the first century (Snyder, 2004, pp.168-169).

3.3.

House church and changing leadership-structures in the post-apostolic era.

3.3.1.

According to historian, Walker (1959, p.41), Polycarp of Smyrna (writing 110-117 AD), when it came to church leadership, mentions **only elders and deacons** and their respective duties.

Ignatius mentions, about the same time, the leadership of monarchical bishops – he was himself the monarchical bishop of Antioch. Walker (1959, p.42) says that how the monarchical bishopric arose is a matter of conjecture. Reasons that have been advanced by scholars are leadership in worship; the financial oversight of the congregation; the care of the poor, and other obligations of charity. Certainly by the sixth decade of the second century, monarchical bishops had become well-nigh universal [to the detriment of the church/house church – personal comment].

Latourette (1953, p.183) mentions that at the beginning of the second century AD a differentiation between clergy and laity began to be seen, and as time passed a priesthood developed which was regarded as the Christian counterpart of that of the ancient Jews. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, expounded the episcopate in letter after letter. Latourette (1953, pp.131-132) further indicates that the matter of apostolic succession was stated forcefully and clearly by Irenaeus in the fourth quarter of the second century. Irenaeus was emphatic that the apostles had appointed as successors bishops to whom they had committed the churches. Peter and Paul had appointed Linus bishop of Rome.

One group that reacted against the earliest clericalizing and formalizing of the church in the second century was the *Montanists*,¹¹ who modelled themselves on the first

¹¹ On this point, see also Walker (1959, p. 56); Cullmann (1956, pp. 206-207).

Christian house groups. They encouraged the prophetic, apocalyptic and spontaneous participation of members in meetings, the leadership of women, personal morality, etc (Banks, 1998, p.50).¹²

3.4.

From the fourth century onwards, protests against the formalizing of the church also led to the **Monastic Movement**, with its strong emphasis on community, such a strong element in the early house churches. The Montanists organized themselves into fraternities, operating as **extended families** in which everyone was valued as a channel of God's grace and could make a valuable contribution.

The first organizer of communities, according to Renwick (1963, p.73), was Pachomius (292-346 AD), who established a monastery at Tabanessi on an island in the Nile in Upper Egypt. By the end of the century many similar communities had been established in Egypt and begun to spread elsewhere. In the West, Monasticism grew more slowly (1963, pp.73-74), in spite of the vigorous support of Athanasius, Jerome, Ambrose and Augustine. Martin of Tours in the 4th century introduced Monasticism to Gaul. He in turn greatly influenced St. Ninian, who in 397 AD established his church and monastery at Whithorn, on the Solway Firth, and took Martin's work as his model. This had powerful effects, not only upon Scotland but upon Ireland as well, and was one of the decisive factors in making the Celtic Church so intensely monastic (1963, p.74).¹³

The point here concerning Monasticism is this: men and women were attracted to the quality of members' lives and found a home in the monastic movement (R & J Banks, 1998, p.52). It is interesting that the church father, Augustine, around 400 AD, argued for the continuation of the domestic sanctuary or home church, with the head of the household as priest of the domestic church (D. Jones, 1989, p.29).

3.5.

Prior to the Reformation, certain anti-Catholic groups also reclaimed aspects of the communal and participatory nature of primitive church life. In France the persecuted

¹² Cullmann reviews the strengths and weaknesses of Montanism (1956, pp.:206-208).

¹³ Renwick (1963, pp.74-76) details the main monastic movements, such as the Benedictine Order, Cluniac Movement, Cistercians, etc.

Waldensians met on farms and in homes throughout the country-side, supporting each other in strongly familial ways and encouraging the contribution of lay as well as ordained members. In England, partly as a result of Wycliffe's influence, groups of believers called **Lollards** met informally in cities and towns to study Scripture, pray and encourage one another (R & J Banks, 1998, p.52).

3.6.

House churches in the Reformation period.

3.6.1.

Walker (1959, p.326) mentions how those who worked with **Luther**, viz. Zwingli and others, called him 'a half-way Reformer!' At one stage Luther spoke very positively about small gatherings, even what we would term 'house churches,' although the Reformers in general were not at all sympathetic to such.^{14 15}

Luther (Birkey, 1988, pp.66-68) spoke of a special 'evangelical service' which needed to be held privately for those "who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth." Such "should sign their names and meet in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works." Such house meetings could provide opportunity for correction and the soliciting of benevolent gifts to be willingly given and distributed to the poor, according to Paul's example in 2 Corinthians 9. Everything would be centred on the Word, prayer and love. Now the type of small group Luther spoke about was not the small group within a parish, but small churches with their own sacramental practice and ministry of the Word. He confessed that he himself would have rejoiced to participate in such groups – he longed to see the house church model of earliest Christianity revived and be used to propagate the faith. Sadly he felt that no one was ready for such a move, and, in spite of his burst of great longing for authentic Christianity in small packages, he continued to

¹⁵ Moltmann (1978, p.122) mentions how the Reformers opposed monasticism and how it disappeared from Protestant churches. Unfortunately they did not formulate a comparably clear denial of the state church. He also adds that without the cloister communities and lay brotherhoods and sisterhoods, the Protestant churches of the time would have been transformed, without resistance, into a political religion. They would have forgotten the cross of Christ and the kingdom of freedom.

work for the renewal of Catholicism. Zwingli's doctrines and the habits of 'sectarians' drove him further from his earlier aspirations.

3.6.2.

In France, **Bucer** advocated smaller Christian communities within the parish church and in Scotland John Knox encouraged 'privy kirks,' i.e. home meetings for earnest believers (R & J Banks, 1998, pp.53-54).

3.6.3.

What Luther failed to implement, as far as house churches was concerned, the sixteenth century **Anabaptists** did. One of their contributions was the expansion of the monastic-type community to embrace the *whole body* of believers. The Anabaptists rejected the papal hierarchy as well as the Lutheran government of princes and pastors and basically grew from an association of many small groups. These groups or house churches felt themselves responsible for admonishment, encouragement and discipling, according to the rule of Christ, as they perceived it from the New Testament. Together they asserted 'believers' baptism' – churches were to be made up of regenerate and baptized believers, united as the body of Christ by the common observance of the Lord's Supper. Each congregation was to appoint its own leaders and through them administer discipline. Prayer/ revival meetings in *homes* were a key dynamic (Walker, 1959, pp.327,330).¹⁶ Vital discipleship permeated the movement, producing an impetus for the early Mennonite founders which viewed the church as a network of relatively small, disciplined fellowships. For them the essence of the congregation was the 'two or three' in a small house church where Christ Himself was present through His Word and Spirit (Birkey, 1988, p.69). (Of course, the Anabaptists were viciously persecuted by the

¹⁶ ¹⁶ A few of the Anabaptists went to doctrinal extremes, such as Melchior Hoffmann who taught a fanatical apocalypticism and isolationism (Walker, 1959, pp.330-331). Renwick (1963, p.115) has however challenged the stereotypic beliefs re the Anabaptists: "In the past, most historians have represented these wild fanatics as being the founders of the Anabaptist movement. Research has shown that this view is undoubtedly erroneous. The real Anabaptists arose in Zurich, in 1522, among honourable men who called themselves 'Brethren' and were led by Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz. They laid great stress on Bible study, objected strongly to such a State Church as was countenanced by Luther and Zwingli, and asked for the removal of pictures and images from churches. They were men of sincere piety, and insisted that the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of truth, was their only weapon."

Reformers, especially Zwingli, because they refused to baptize their infants¹⁷ – Anabaptist leaders Felix Mantz (a Hebrew scholar) was drowned, Conrad Grebel (a Zurich city councillor) died in jail, Georg Blaurock (former monk and evangelist) was beaten and burnt at the stake in Tirol. Despite this persecution (in the Netherlands and Friesland alone, between 1535 and 1546, 30,000 Anabaptists were killed), the movement spread like wild fire (Simson, 1998, pp.67-68).

3.7.

House churches in the post-Reformation period.

3.7.1.

In 1640, **Jean de Labadie**, a former Jesuit, had become a pastor in Amiens, France. He had one goal in life viz. the fellowship of true believers in small 'brotherhoods.' Because of persecution he ended up in the Netherlands, where he focused on taking the church back into homes. He called these house churches 'conventicles,' and gave them practical guidance as to how to run their informal meetings.

3.7.2.

One of de Labadie's students was **Philipp Jakob Spener**, the father of *Pietism* in Germany. Sensing that the existing church needed restoration, and that small groups for individual encouragement and discipline were necessary, he began meetings in homes in 1670 under the name 'pious gatherings' (*collegia pietatis*). Unfortunately he yielded under pressure from the established churches and made his small groups an appendage to the established church (Simson, 1998, p.68).

3.7.3.

This phenomenon also occurred among the French **Huguenots** and the English **Dissenters**. The public execution of Claude Brousson, a famous leader of the Huguenots, affected Daniel Defoe and others in England. Under the title 'The Church in the Wilderness' (because of persecution) they organized themselves into house

¹⁷ Walker gives details (1959, pp.326-327) of the founding circumstances of the Anabaptists, amid baptismal-mode conflicts (Blaurock, Grebel and others finding no basis in the Scriptures for infant-baptism), the rejection of the state-church idea, etc.

churches. In addition to their secret meetings in homes they organized larger 'celebrations' in forest clearings. Defoe was ultimately jailed, where he wrote his famous *Robinson Crusoe* (Simson, 1998, pp.69-70). The seventeenth century **Quakers** were influenced by these movements and meet in house meetings to this day (Birkey, 1988, p.69).

3.7.4.

Another example of the NT 'small church' system may be found in Zinzendorff's 18th century micro-community of exiled **Moravians** in Herrnhut, Germany.¹⁸ The Count's success at Herrnhut in turning diverse peoples into a unified community demonstrated that Luther's original idea about 'house church' was in fact viable. He developed *ecclesiolae*, i.e. 'little churches' within the broader church community. These met mostly in homes and later in simple structures. The Moravian movement radically minimized the prevalent clergy-laity distinctions by implementing the priesthood of all believers, both men and women, more fully than any Christian group up to that time. We find among the Moravians an intensive experience of community which led into service, not only in evangelism but in care for the poor. "Proportionally, the missionary dimension of Moravian life exceeded that of any Christian group from the first century. Never has a single expression of the church had so many of its members involved in mission, travelled to so many places, reached out to so many different peoples, or influenced so many other churches to follow its example" (R & J Banks, 1998, pp.57-58).

3.7.5.

It was through a Moravian that **John Wesley** found his heart 'strangely warmed' during a meeting in Aldersgate, England. But he learned more from the Moravians: he adapted their structure to the needs of the new movement that grew up around his field-preaching (R & J Banks, 1998, pp.58-59).

Snyder (2004, p.81) has given a detailed account of Wesley's approach.¹⁹ The heart of this movement was built around the small 'class meetings' which were in fact 'house churches,' meeting in the various neighbourhoods where people lived. Wesley's

¹⁸ For a fuller treatment of the Moravian movement, see Walker (1959, pp.450-454).

¹⁹ Walker also has a fuller treatment of the revival movement under John Wesley (1959, pp.454-464).

manuals for class leaders were squarely based on the kind of community life described in the Book of Acts' apostolic model. {Snyder comments on how originally the church's (and Wesley's own initial) reaction to field-preaching was tantamount to 'how can anyone possibly experience salvation outside of a church building (cited in R & J Banks, 1998, pp.58-59)}. Snyder (1996, pp.182-184) adds, "Wesley's efforts here say much to the contemporary church. Trapped in rigid institutional patterns, many of today's churches seldom experience that fellowship of the Holy Spirit pictured in the New Testament. This was also true of eighteenth-century Anglicanism – and Wesley did something about it")²⁰

3.7.6.

In Norway, in the nineteenth century, **Hans Hauge**, farmer's son and lay preacher, pioneer of factories and other industrial enterprises, started to preach a message of reformation of life and meeting in homes with some success. Unfortunately, because Norway was a fiercely Lutheran nation at the time, Hauge was persecuted, jailed and exiled to Denmark. He returned however to write books, tracts and encourage people to meet in homes for fellowship and mutual edification (Simson, 2006, p.29). During his last years, relations with the authorities were friendly, and today Hauge is generally recognized as the initiator of the powerful Christian laymen's movement in Norway (Wisloff, 1974, p.453).

3.8.

House churches, a more recent phenomenon.

3.8.1.

In 1971 Dr. Billy Graham was quoted in *Christianity Today* as having "noticed that at various church conferences and retreats, emphasis was increasing on the 'house church' *in many parts of the world*" [my italics] (Birkey, 1988, p.71).

3.8.2.

²⁰ Walker (1959, p.460) has an interesting section on Wesley's 'bands,' derived from the Moravians. Each consisted of about 12 persons, under a 'class leader.' These groups were characterized by spiritual oversight, discipline and financial commitment to the world.

Greenway documented the use of house churches in **Mexico City** in 1973. In the early 1990's Galo Vasquez, director of Vision Evangelizadora Latinoamericana, instituted a strategy for the poorer communities of Mexico City whereby their goal was to establish 10,000 self-functioning house churches by 2000 AD. (acquiring land and building sanctuary-type churches being a near impossibility for the poorer multitudes of the mega-city) (Birkey, 1991, p.7).

3.8.3.

Guy (cited in D.Jones, 1989, pp.30-31) related the use of house churches in **Viet Nam** in 1979. The communist government closed 200 Vietnamese church buildings in 1975 - a Vietnamese pastor reported recently that the government offered to reopen the same churches, obviously in an effort to gain further control of the Christians. To the officials' shock the church leaders replied that they did not want the church buildings back. Their followers had experienced being church outside of physical sanctuaries and now no longer wanted to be limited by the buildings (Birkey, 1991, p.6) (we are not denying the use of buildings *per se* - they obviously have their advantages, like spaciousness, special communication facilities, etc).

3.8.4.

Castillo (D. Jones, 1989, p.30) by 1982 had assimilated a great amount of data on successful house churches in **Philippines, Puerto Rico, Singapore and Japan.**

3.8.5.

The 1970's saw the birth of '*the house church movement*' (somewhat of a misnomer) in **Britain.**

According to Simson (1998, pp.72-73), this movement arose primarily from disenchantment with traditional church-life in the light of the 'rediscovery' of the spiritual gifts given to believers. Some traditional churches couldn't accommodate the latter and so those otherwise persuaded were in a sense forced to meet in homes and smaller facilities. Because it wasn't specifically a house church movement, those meeting in

homes soon moved to bigger venues like schools, halls, etc. One of the early unfortunate results of the strong leadership these groups required was 'heavy shepherding,' i.e. an excessive, heavy-handed approach to counselling and pastoring, resulting in too much authority landing in the hands of a key leader. In short, the British 'house church movement' renewed the qualitative aspects of the church without touching the *structure* – it poured new wine into a new set of old wineskins (Simson, 1998, pp.72-73).²¹

3.8.6.

Most people know of the massive house church movement in **China**.²²

3.8.6.1.

The Chinese house church – through the eyes of David Adeney.

Adeney (cited in Birkey, 1988, p.72-73), of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, distinguished **several major reasons for the dramatic success of house churches in China**:

- Firstly, because severely persecuted, they had to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials, being forced to exist without church buildings [most of the operational apparatus we are bogged down with in the West is wonderfully missing] - Chinese Christians have learned what it means to be 'the household of faith.'
- Secondly, lay leadership became strong, particularly among women.
- Thirdly, the most basic form of evangelism has been that of relationship and friendship, impacting family and neighbours.
- Fourth, suffering for the sake of the gospel is considered 'normal' – thus house churches have thrived in a volatile political climate not unlike the church in Acts.

²¹ For another evaluation of the British 'house church' movement, see Gibbs and Coffee (2001, pp.159-162): *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry*.

²² It must be understood that *some* house church groups in China have tended to have a more hierarchical leadership/pastoral structure, compared to the 'flat' house church leadership structures elsewhere in that country and the rest of the world. The church in this gargantuan land has flourished from 'house to house' in the manner of the early church (Birkey, 1988, pp.71ff).

3.8.6.2.

The Chinese house church – through the eyes of David Aikman.

Former *Time* magazine Beijing bureau chief, author and foreign policy consultant Aikman (2003, pp.74ff,80-89), has written a detailed account of the house church movement in China which has displayed, and continues to display, the most rapid church growth anywhere in the world. He identifies **the three most important movements:**

- a) Fancheng Movement: this was born in a little village in the populous Henan Province in the 1960's, out of persecution and intimidation, meeting in homes for worship and prayer and witnessing daily miracles of healing and exorcism (as in Acts). Li Tianen, an itinerant evangelist, trained up leaders for the soon-resulting networks of house churches. These leaders became known as 'uncles.' By 1974 there were thousands of house church Christians, described by the communist government as the 'Jesus Nest.' In the 1980's Li Tianen and others were training up newly-converted youth, sending them out in pairs to 'evangelise China' (after evangelising their family and friends). Such was the response that by the early 1990's the network numbered about 5 million. This house church network deliberately held to a loose structure. Highly talented, much persecuted, beaten and imprisoned (as recently as July 2006), Li Tianeng, rose to become the most mature and importantly, the most tolerant, of the network leaders. It is hard to think of any house church leader in China more visionary or entrepreneurial in evangelizing his own country, envisaging China as a missionary-sending nation.
- b) Tanghe Fellowship: the second of the big Henan Province networks, led by the older Feng Jianguo [note the Chinese church's respect for older leaders]. This has also been a loosely-knit fellowship, more Pentecostal in worship-style and pursuit of the 'miraculous' than the other groups. Feng was converted at eleven, arrested in 1975 for 'counter-revolution' activity and released in 1980. In the early days the Fellowship members carried around hand-written Bibles, miracles abounded (e.g. immediate healings when people professed faith), etc. This movement went through the 'three shedding period,' i.e. shedding blood under

persecution, prolonged weeping in the sorrow of repentance, as well as weeping in prayer. In 1994 the network sent out 72 young evangelists into 22 provinces of China. Teenagers planted house churches in Inner Mongolia, many healings and exorcisms took place, especially in N.E. China's Heilongjiang Province. Feng's many imprisonments did not affect the work radically because he had established basic leadership structures as well as a focus on education, literature, pastoral work, children's work and mission. Scores of couples intentionally migrated into every province of China in evangelism and mission.

- c) The 'Born Again' Movement: founded by Xu Yongze, also known as Peter Xu. He was converted as a child, studied mechanical engineering and took over leadership of the network in 1997, having faced much opposition and house-arrest in 1967 already. This large movement became fairly controversial not so much because of Peter Xu's healthy emphasis on discipleship but of his advocacy of a very strict moral lifestyle. Thus it became normative in their meetings and retreats to weep as evidence of the Spirit's work – followers became known as 'the weepers.' Many of the 'uncles' in the house church movement did not consider Xu's group a cult, which some others saw as being too legalistic.

Before we leave Aikman's (2003, pp.89-91) intriguing history of the Chinese house church networks, we note the commendable and persistent attempts of their leaders to find **unity** between the groups. By the mid-1990's the major house church networks, including the Born Again Movement, began concrete unity-talks. Note that the differences were more theological than that of personality, with the leaders genuinely respecting one another. These unity-talks were headed up by Zhang Rongliang, who arranged for a major secret conference in Henan Province in August of 1998. It produced a handwritten document, 'A United Appeal of the Various Branches of the Chinese House Church' [note singular 'House Church': personal comment]. This document included appeals to government to stop persecuting the house church movement and not confine the church to the official 'Three-Self' church. There are approximately 10 million believers in the Three-Self church but 80 million believers in the

home churches in the House Church [i.e. in the Chinese house church movement as a whole – personal explanation]. The House Church represents the mainstream of Christianity in China – therefore, the government should face reality as it is. [Do note that the House Church Movement pleaded the case of persecuted mainline denominations as well]. Finally in November of 1998, four of the major networks (Fangcheng, Tanghe, Born Again Movement and Anhui) adopted ‘A Confession of Faith.’ This confession received immediate and widespread recognition by the house church groups. It focused on theology and training. As Aikman (2003, pp.92-96) points out, while taking a stand on theological orthodoxy, the ethos was that of **flexibility**. (Unfortunately, due to some of the leaders’ travel and exposure to the church in the West, a certain amount of distrust has set in since. However, the old friendships of the ‘uncles’ have survived the storms)

3.8.6.3.

The Chinese house church – through the eyes of Tony Lambert. Lambert (1994, pp.9ff,12-14,18,69-71) focuses on some of the more personal and dramatic aspects of Chinese house church life. Covering the church during the Cultural Revolution (with all its ensuing and dramatic political events like Tiananmen Square, ‘Document 19,’ etc), he speaks first of the ‘death and resurrection’ of the Chinese church. It was written off as ‘dead and buried’ by the Chinese press, academics and even church leaders abroad – only to ‘resurrect’ within a few years (newspaper quotes, detailed statistics documented). According to Lambert (1994, p.11), it is only in recent times that the full extent of the Chinese church’s suffering has become clearly evident, with very few parallels in the history of the Christian Church. The writer documents how suffering drove believers back to a **grassroots, de-institutionalised and indigenous house church strategy**, which enabled them not only to survive persecution but in fact thrive as centres of evangelism and care. House churches met as groups of four under trees and in homes for fellowship and prayer, spiritual revival broke out among the youth (in one instance, four hundred were baptized at one Service), one young girl was put in charge of over 70 house groups, the groups drew the poor as well as professionals and intellectuals, the church experienced not only many miracles of healing and exorcism but a great sense of love and care for all and sundry. Overwhelmingly it was the **house**

church infrastructure which was a major factor, under the Spirit of God, in feeding, holding and channelling the phenomenal growth of the Chinese church during all this time (1994, pp.122-123,133,235,139,148-153).

3.8.6.4.

The Chinese house church – through the eyes of ‘Brother Yun.’

Brother Yun (2003), on behalf of himself and the major House Church leaders in China, gives us a fascinating insight into *The Back to Jerusalem* vision of the Chinese house church from its earliest beginnings, i.e. the desire to take the gospel back to Jerusalem via the ancient Chinese trade routes. It was helped by a small group of Christians studying at the Northwest Bible Institute (founded by James Hudson Taylor II) in Shaanxi Province (2003, pp.23ff). This group was led by Mark Ma, a native of Henan Province.

However, the ‘Back to Jerusalem Band’ founded at the Northwest Bible Institute was not the only Chinese group whom God was calling to minister to the Muslim peoples in the West. That honour belonged to a group called the ‘Jesus Family’ of the 1920’s. Yun goes on to describe how they targeted towns and villages, lived communally, their deep Christian love amazing many onlookers (2003, pp.39ff). They suffered terrible hardships. It seems that after a time they lost direction due to leadership problems and schisms.

Throughout the 1950’s to the 1980’s, there had been no active talk about taking the gospel back to Jerusalem (2003, p.49). Times were so dark for believers in China that it took all their energy and prayers just to survive those years with their faith intact. It was in the 1990’s, through the visit of one of the earlier visionaries, Simon Zhao, to Henan Province, that the vision was revived under the guidance of Brother Yun and others. As a result, for many house church leaders, the challenge once more became clear (2003, p.50).

According to Yun (2003, p.53), God had placed a heavy burden on the current house church leadership to see the *Back to Jerusalem* vision fulfilled. In the mean time, Yun was imprisoned four times and arrested on more than thirty other occasions. He left China in 1997 so that he could facilitate the *Back to Jerusalem* vision more freely. He has spoken in more than 1,000 churches around the world since then, bringing

awareness and encouraging prayer for the Chinese missionary enterprise. He is currently based in Germany with his wife, Deling, and two children.

The point is, the *Back to Jerusalem* Movement has been for decades a Chinese **house church vision**, now being extended broadened to the church at large. The first team of 39 Chinese missionaries departed China in March 2000 for a neighbouring Buddhist country. Today there are hundreds of Chinese missionaries working outside China in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia. Thousands more are in training, learning languages such as Arabic and English that will be put to use on the mission field (2003, p.xi). (In the opening commendations of Yun's book, *Back to Jerusalem*, Brewer in his review in EMQ magazine of Jan. 2004, wrote, "The key to evangelizing the world is to evangelize Asia. And the key to evangelizing Asia is to train and mobilize Chinese house church leaders of the largest underground movements in China. Over a century ago, the missionary statesman, J. R. Mott, quoted in *China's Millions* of April 1902, the words of Napoleon, 'When China is moved it will change the face of the globe.' (2003, introductory pages)

3.8.6.5.

The Chinese house church – through the eyes of Kreider and McClung.

It is interesting at this point to document some of the **latest trends and statistics** in the Chinese house church movement (Kreider & McClung, 2007, pp.119-122):

- An estimated 35,000 Chinese become Christians every day through the various house church movements in the nation. There are over 100 million believers in these unregistered house churches in China.
(one woman, for example, is responsible for 400,000 believers in her network).
- Most house church leaders receive no financial support from their house churches (all members are expected to 'tithe' their income) – usually some funding is given to missionaries or apostolic leaders sent to other parts of China.
- The underground church has a vision of 100,000 missionaries taking the message back to the Middle East and Europe via the old 'silk road.'
- NB: the house church groups in China have committed themselves to the goal, *even if* freed from the persecution of Communism in the future, of having no

church buildings. They have committed to concentrate rather on the training and sending of people than on the construction of buildings.

3.8.7.

Another large nation in which the house church has exploded in recent times is **India**. Church growth in the more rural areas is based on NT-styled house churches called *Kithu Sevena*, meaning 'Christ's shadow.' These house churches are indigenous and include social programs for the upliftment of the community. Their worship-style remains cultural.

The USA Southern Baptists working in India are using Jesus' outline in Luke 10 (house-to-house discipleship) in a very successful way (Kreider & McClung, 2007, pp.124-125). They began in 1989 with 28 churches and grew to 2,000 over 9 years. By the year 2000, a church planting movement had erupted, catapulting the number of churches to more than 4,500 with an estimated 300,000 believers. Baptists realized that **house churches** [my emphasis] lay at the heart of successful church planting movements, for three reasons (Kreider & McClung, 2007, pp.127):

- House churches reproduce rapidly.
- House churches increase by multiplication.
- House churches are indigenous.

3.8.8.

Consider the house churches of **Africa**.

The writer corresponds with a house church planter in a North African country – details of this venture cannot be given due to the danger to the 'underground' church in that region. The writer has also been informed, very recently, by a missionary leader working in Muslim countries, of five house churches in another highly sensitive N. African country where previously there has been no Christian witness at all – unfortunately one of the house church believers was killed very recently. ²³

²³ Courtesy of David Lundy, Director of Arab World Mission, at the 2009 Bless the Nations annual conference in Port Elizabeth, held over the last weekend of June 2009.

In East Africa, Kreider and McClung (2007, pp.34-35) document the story of a church in Ethiopia that was forced underground due to persecution by the authorities in 1982. The Meserete Kristos Church fell under a complete ban – all of their church buildings were seized and used for other purposes, and several of their prominent leaders were imprisoned for years without trial or charges. This church’s membership at that time stood at approximately 5,000 members. As the fires of persecution got hotter each year, they were forced to meet in clandestine home groups. Nearly a decade later, the Marxist government fell and the same government leaders who closed the doors of church buildings in the early 1980’s led the procession of God’s people back into those buildings. The most startling news was that the church had grown while ‘underground’ from 5,000 to more than 50,000 people. During the persecution these believers had met from house to house in small groups, with hundreds of believers involved in the work of this ministry. They groups no longer focused on church buildings or church programs. Instead, their time was spent in prayer and making disciples of the un-evangelised.

And in South Africa?

The writer is aware of house church networks in Port Elizabeth and the Eastern Cape, the Northern Cape, The Free State, Pretoria, Cape Town and the Western Cape [this also includes Floyd McClung’s network of ‘simple churches’ in the township areas of Cape Town, where they have recently established a training centre for general upliftment of the poor, the teaching of leadership and job skills to empower the unemployed and church planters who will move into Africa as ‘tentmakers.’²⁴].

3.8.9.

Garrison (1999, p.28), of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, relates how in the early nineteen one of their missionaries began a mentoring relationship with a believer in **Cambodia**. Six other church-planters joined them and they began simple house churches based on Bible-storying. Some of the countryside churches met in larger houses which accommodated up to fifty people, prayer was mobilized and many healings and exorcisms took place, in fact these continue to this day.

²⁴ Floyd and Sally McClung put out a regular newsletter, detailing their vision for Africa, commenting on house church topics and church planting movements around the world: available from floyd.mcclung@gmail.com

3.8.10.

House church has grown among **Indonesian youth** (Birkey, 1988, p.74).

3.8.11.

A house church leader in **Nepal** tells North American Christians that “to be a church you don’t need much – just a Bible and a Christian friend or two to worship God together” (Birkey, 1991, p.6).²⁵

3.8.12.

One church in **Myanmar** had 1,000 regular attendees, filling the building to capacity. When the government outlawed their gathering and closed the church building, the members dispersed into private homes. Soon they totalled 12,000 people (Birkey, 1991, p.6).

3.8.13.

Some Third World theologians like Cook (cited in Birkey, 1991, p.6) believe a true *ecclesio genesis* to be at work in the small ‘base’ church communities of **South America**.²⁶ ‘Base’ refers to the sociological base, i.e. the poor and marginalized at the bottom of the sociological pyramid, which includes nearly 80% of Latin America. The ‘base church’ agenda generally centres on community life in small groups, ministry to the poor and prophetic mission of the church to society. The movement attempts the serious practice of the priesthood of all believers. These groups have included women and youth in their fellowship and ministry. In 1998 an estimated 200,000 groups were operative in South America (R & J Banks, 1998, p.63).

Kreider and McClung (2007, pp.123-124) have documented how house churches were the only recourse during the early 1990’s economic recession in South America. Church planters began to train and release new workers into the field – in 1989 there were 129 churches in one area of this country, 9 years later the number had grown exponentially to 1,918 in the same area. Church members had been prevented from travelling long

²⁵ The writer has very recently learned that a house church network in Cape Town and surrounds is networking with church-planters of ‘simple churches’ in Nepal and India, with huge multiplication. Email correspondence, Vermeulen, P., pieterindia@gmail.com [accessed 10/03/2010].

²⁶ Cook, G., 1984. The Protestant Predicament: From Base Ecclesiastical Community to Established Church – A Brazilian Case Study. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 8:3, pp. 98,101.

distances to their church buildings, so they ‘moved their meetings into homes and found that growth greatly accelerated.’

3.8.14.

While it is mainly in non-Western countries that the most thorough-going experiments in regrouping the church around the home and in developing home-church-based meetings are taking place, there are voices in **Western countries** with long-standing Christian traditions that are calling for the same kind of change.

These voices are not confined to any one denomination or form of Christianity – R and J Banks (1998, pp.64-69) mention such voices among Episcopalians (e.g. Anglican Bishops JAT Robinson, David Prior), Presbyterians (John Allan in Scotland), Baptists (Lawrence Richards in his *A New Face for the Church*), Roman Catholics (Bernard Lee & Michael Cowan in their book *Dangerous Memories: House Churches and the American Story*), etc.

Barna (cited in Reid Smith, 2007, p.1) expects “that the percentage of Americans who experience and express faith primarily through ‘alternative faith-based communities’ like house churches, will increase from 5% (2000) to 30-35% by 2025.” According to Barna (cited in A. Jones, 2006, p.1), the N. American house church had grown from 1% in 1996 to 9% in 2006. Even more recently Barna has come up with the following data (cited in Kreider & McClung 2007, pp.129-130):

- In a typical week, 9 percent of USA adults attend a house church.
- In absolute numbers, that 9 percent equals roughly 20 million people.
- In a typical month, about 43 million USA adults attend a house church.
- All told, 70 million USA adults have at least experimented with participation in a house church.
- Focusing *only* on those who attend some kind of church (about 43 percent of the nation), 74 percent of them attend only a traditional church, 19 percent attend both a traditional and a house church and 5 percent are hardcore house church members. [note: this study counted only attendance at house churches, not small groups or cells that are part of a traditional church model].

Barna (cited in Kreider & McClung, 2007, pp.130-131) further records house church networks throughout N. America (and Canada): in Denver, Dallas, Austin, Cincinnati, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland, Colorado, etc. In Las Vegas and Los Angeles, house churches are penetrating restaurants, hotels, alternate communities, etc., in meaningful ways.

Even traditional churches are transitioning into house church networks – a case in point is Vineyard Central in Cincinnati, amongst others in the Pacific North West, Texas, etc. Mega-churches are beginning to plant house church networks, notably Saddleback Church in California, pastored by the renowned pastor/author, Rick Warren (Kreider & McClung, 2007, p.137).

Garrison says about the church in the USA (cited in Kreider & McClung, 2007, p.127),

“There is an awful lot to commend house churches in the United States. There are quantifiable realities, such as the cost of church buildings, the exploding population, the increase in urbanization and the increasing cost of property in the cities. There is no way we can build enough church buildings. It becomes a question of stewardship. Can you justify putting 20-30 million dollars into building a church just so that you can add another 1,000 people to a church that already has a couple of thousand people? I am concerned about the 80+ million un-churched Americans. I am not convinced that our existing structures will draw them in. The house church movement has the potential to do that.”

4. HOUSE CHURCH IN THE HOME, CITY AND WORLD...

4.1.

An OT/NT perspective on the local church collaborating.

Hadaway, Wright and DuBose (1987, pp.39-42) see the first definitive expression of the church in the NT as the house church. It was the most natural structure to develop because of two realities: the nature of the church itself and the nature of the social

context in which the church was born. The apostolic church was at the same time the 'household of God' (1 Tim.3:15) – the church was the assembled family of God. In this regard the NT church reflected deep OT roots.²⁷ The 'people of God' in the OT were referred to as 'the children of Israel,' i.e. the children of God. This family-orientated NT community of faith did not exist in isolation but was influenced by the social context. The early church was an urban church, e.g. in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth and Rome. The NT church also met *en mass* to hear apostolic preaching, e.g. on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) (at the portico of Solomon (Acts 3), in the city of Samaria (Acts 8) and on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17). Mass meetings were also related to the ongoing expression of church life – thus for example Paul hired the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus for public meetings (Acts 19). The NT church acted at these different levels – however the basic unit remained primary, viz. 'the church in the house.'

4.1.1.

The church at Antioch as an example (Acts 13).

Gehring (2004, pp.111-112) deals with this in some detail. The mention of its different leaders implies that the church had grown beyond the initial phases of development, where the congregation consisted of merely one house church or perhaps only a few. A **city-wide organization of the church** [my emphasis] had become necessary. It is possible that, just as in Jerusalem, some of these men were leaders of house churches and as such formed a sort of leadership 'council' for the church as a whole in Antioch. In addition, we can assume a plurality of house churches in Antioch – the fact that the believers in Antioch were first called 'Christians' indicates that they had attracted

²⁷ Grudem (1994, pp.853-854), writing on the nature of the church, points out that "this process whereby Christ builds the church is just a continuation of the pattern established by God in the Old Testament whereby he called people to himself to be a worshiping assembly before him. There are several indications *in the Old Testament* that God thought of his people as a 'church,' a people assembled for the purpose of worshiping God. When Moses tells the people that the Lord said to him, '*Gather the people to me*, that I may let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live upon the earth...' (Deut. 4:10), the Septuagint translates the word for 'gather' (Heb. *qahal*) with the Greek term *ekklesiazō*, 'to summon an assembly,' the verb that is cognate to the New Testament noun *ekklesia*, 'church.' It is not surprising, then, that the New Testament authors can speak of the Old Testament people as a 'church' (*ekklesia*). For example, Stephen speaks of the people of Israel in the wilderness as 'the church (*ekklesia*) in the wilderness' (Acts 7:38, author's translation)... This emphasis is not surprising in light of the fact that the New Testament authors see Jewish believers and Gentile believers alike to be now united in the church. Together they have been made 'one;' (Eph. 2:14), they are 'one new man' (v. 15) and 'fellow citizens' (v. 19), and '**members of the household of God**' [my emphasis] (v.19)."

attention to themselves as quite a sizeable group – the residents of Antioch would not have noticed one relatively small house church. Apart from that, as the third or fourth largest city in the empire and the capital of Syria and with a large segment of the Jewish population being proselytes, Antioch was fruitful soil for the Jewish and Gentile mission. The cosmopolitan character of the city, with its stable Roman government, also speaks of the rapid growth of the Christian community network in Antioch. Galatians 2:11-14 seems to indicate a house church network in the city of Antioch – e.g. the dispute that Paul describes here as taking place ‘before them all’ implies that the whole church was gathered at one place.

4.2.

House church today as part of the larger group.

4.2.1.

Robinson (cited in R & J Banks, 1999, p.65) in 1960 already argued for the church existing at three levels: as the individual home church, as the large congregation where home churches meet as a whole group, and as a third level of organization. He began by insisting that the house church should not be regarded as a temporary expedient in a new area or as an evangelistic weapon for reaching outsiders: both these conceptions fall short of the NT. The ‘church in the house’ **is theologically necessary** [my emphasis]. According to Robinson, this is the first level at which the church exists. The second level is the regular coming together of these house churches as a larger group to worship and fellowship together. The third level involves the occasional gathering of all the congregations in a particular place, in a kind of cathedral-like or stadium-like setting.

Snyder (1996, pp.98ff) likewise insists that the local church must also meet as part of the larger group. He mentions how when living in Brazil, in Sao Paulo, the Pentecostal evangelist Manoel de Mello launched the *Brasil Para Cristo* movement. Each Saturday night thousands of his followers would pack into buses and meet centrally to share the joy and excitement of a great throng of believers. Afterwards they would scatter to their hundreds of ‘little congregations’ – but they were not discouraged, for they knew they

were part of a people, a movement. Something had happened, something big and God-sized.

Gehring (2004, p.307) gives the example of the church in China. The house churches and other local congregations often meet together and cooperate in things of the kingdom (particularly in Shanghai, Beijing, etc). Communion is celebrated once a month as a part of the gathered service and weekly in many of the house churches. On Easter of 1981, for example, 48 individuals were baptized during the worship service of a traditional congregation in Nanjing; most of them came to faith in Christ in house churches. Missionaries are sent out by the Three-Self Movement into areas where as yet no house churches exist. These evangelists find living quarters in the area and stay for three to six months (see Lk. 10), with the objective of starting a house church there. It is primarily in this manner that Christianity has been spread throughout China.

Simson (1998, pp.37-39) has emphasised that the house church movement also 'resurrects the city church,' literally 'the church of the city.' All Christians of a city or region in this way meet as necessary in city-wide celebrations, where the city's most gifted Christians and humble servants forget all titles and politics and, in a new maturity, sacrifice their own name, denominationalism, reputation and single-handed success to the single advancement of the Kingdom of the only King. He says, "Imagine the public tumult when this collective, city-based and authentic leadership regularly provides prophetic vision, teaches apostolic standards, stands united, blesses each other and speaks to the world with one voice." The church needs to excel in the small so that it may also excel in the large.

Kreider & McClung (2007, pp.19-20,25) cite practical examples, mention the example of Pennsylvania, USA. They also supply this interesting diagram (2007, p.176):



	Mega-Churches
	House-Church Networks

An important point here is that when churches cooperate in this manner, the focus is not on church unity *per se*, but on Christ’s mandate in the Great Commission (Mt. 28), resulting in amazing church unity on the ground.²⁸

4.3.

A plea for visible unity at this higher/broader level.

Snyder (2004, pp.205-207) pleads for visible unity at this higher level (Jn. 17). Cooperation and unity don’t just happen apart from intentional leadership and facilitating structures. “Wherever possible in cities around the world, large public rallies should be held regularly, uniting all the people of God who will cooperate. If in the world’s major cities all true Christians would unite regularly in a ‘great congregation’ to joyfully sing praise to God, hear the Word and bear witness to justice, mercy and the truth of God’s kingdom, the impact on the world at large would be incalculable.”

5. THE IDEAL AND THE REAL

²⁸ The writer can testify to some 20 plus years of missions-networking of churches in his home city, Port Elizabeth SA, involving over 100 church groups/affiliations – during that time, as one closely involved in the process, he cannot recall any serious disagreement. On the contrary it has led to a church unity which has been remarked on repeatedly by visitors from across SA and in fact across the world.

There is the ever-present danger of idealising (and inappropriately copying) certain ‘models’ of house church and the house church movement.

We do well to heed the warning of Peterson (2007, p.2), writing on ‘the purification of means,’

“... the *how* of following Jesus and taking up with the world cannot be depersonalized by reduction into a how-to formula. We are involved in a highly personal, inter-relational, dynamic **way of life** [my emphasis] consisting of many elements – emotions and ideas, weather and work, friends and enemies, seductions and illusions, legislation and elections – that are constantly being rearranged, always in flux, and always in relation to our very personal and holy God and our very personal (but not so holy!) brothers and sisters. Ways and means permeate everything that we *are* in worship and community. But none of the ways and means can be compartmentalized into functions or isolated concepts apart from this comprehensive and Trinitarian world in which we follow Jesus. They permeate everything we are and do. If any of the *means* we use to follow Jesus are extraneous to who we are in Jesus – detached ‘things’ or role ‘models’ – they detract from the *end* of following Jesus.”

Furthermore (2007, p.3),

“To take a person trained in ways and means that are custom-formulated to fit into the world’s ways and then place that person in the worshiping, evangelizing, witnessing, reconciling, peace-making, justice-advocating people of God is equivalent to putting an adolescent whose sole qualifications consists of a fascination with speed, the ability to step on the accelerator, and expertise in operating the radio, behind the wheel of a brand-new Porsche.”²⁹

5.1.

²⁹ Peterson then (2007, pp.4ff) gives an insightful critique of what he calls ‘The American Way.’

House churches and house church movements are not without their challenges, but such challenges can often be healthy and productive. ³⁰

R and J Banks (2004, p.43-48) warn that, in attempting to draw contemporary applications from the early church, we may be creating unrealistic expectations. The communities of the NT often failed to embody the vision of Christ and the apostles – we need to guard against the problems and pitfalls encountered by those first communities. These early communities were *families*, and relationships within families are not always warm and supportive. Families have their ups and downs. Because families live together so intimately, there is even potential for extreme disharmony – take for example the tensions in the Corinthian church. However, there are positive elements even in family discords – after all, it is only through disagreements and conflict that the truth, and those who hold to it, can be known (1 Cor. 11:18-19). Despite all this, the NT church leaders and members never moved away from the basic directions as to how the church should operate. They never moved away from the view that the church is an extended family or clan-like gathering. ³¹ So, for example, the apostle Paul looked beyond the failings of the fledgling churches to their fullest potential for being the church and for being God’s presence in the world – despite all his realism about the actual situation, for Paul the reality and power of Christ among the community was far greater. ³² As Edwards (cited in R & J Banks, 2004, pp.246-247) says, studying the New Testament churches “does not imply that we meet (exactly) [my insertion] the way they met. Rather, that we discover in the same way they discovered how to meet.”

³⁰ We elaborate this point in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

³¹ Grudem (1994, p.858), writing on metaphors for the church, says “There are several family images – for example, Paul views the church as a *family* when he tells Timothy to act as if all the church members were members of a larger family: ‘Do not rebuke an older man but exhort him as you would your father; treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity’ (1 Tim. 5:1-2). God is our heavenly Father (Eph. 3:14), and we are his sons and daughters, for God says to us, ‘I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty’ (2 Cor. 6:18). We are therefore brothers and sisters with each other in God’s family (Matt. 12:49-50; I John 3:14-18). A somewhat different family metaphor is seen when Paul refers to the church as the *bride of Christ*. He says that the relationship between a husband and wife ‘refers to Christ and the church’ (Eph. 5:32), and he says that he brought about the engagement between Christ and the church at Corinth and that it resembles the engagement between a bride and her husband-to-be: ‘I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I may present you as a pure virgin’ (2 Cor. 11:2 – NASB) – here Paul is looking forward to the time of Christ’s return as the time when the church will be presented to him as his bride.”

³² R and J Banks (2004, pp.43-44) handle ‘the danger of inappropriately copying the first Christians’ and then also (2004, p. 47) ‘**The danger of side-lining the first Christians.**’ There is surely a need for biblical balance here.

5.2.

It would be dangerous to ignore the rôle of small groups/house churches today.

With regard to cultural and political transformation, the historian Butterfield (cited in R & J Banks, 2004, pp.246-247) has said,

“The strongest organizational unit in the world’s history would appear to be that which we call a cell; for it is a remorseless self-multiplier; it is exceptionally difficult to destroy; it can preserve its intensity of local life while vast organizations quickly wither when they are weakened at the centre; it can defy the power of governments; and it is the appropriate lever for prying open any status quo. Whether we take early Christianity or sixteenth century Calvinism or modern communism, this seems the appointed way by which a mere handful of people may open up a new chapter in the history of civilization.”

House churches are not the only ‘cells’ through which church renewal takes place (other units such as vocational groups and action groups, etc., also have played a significant role) – however, house churches are a good example of what the economists Finn and Pemberton call ‘small disciplined communities,’ and the theologians Lee and Cowan call ‘voluntary mediated structures’ (cited in Banks, 2004, pp.246-247). They are foundational to any quest for renewal in church and society. They are critical for any attempt at regrouping the people of God for community and mission. They open up a way for ‘getting back to basics’ and ‘bringing the church up to date’ at the same time (Banks, 2004, pp.246-247).

6. CONCLUSION.

J.V. Taylor (cited in Banks, 2004, pp.71-72), writing of “little congregations” [house churches] [in 1979]:

“The marvel is that the ‘little congregations’ are already coming to be regarded as normative in so many places. The process is bound to go on as the mobility and fragmentation of human societies increase. **These small units of Christian presence are emphatically not a halfway house through which the uncommitted will eventually be drawn back into the local churches. Nor are they an interim structure which ought to grow into new local churches in due course.... Too many people in the church insist upon regarding any other form than the conventional congregation as subnormal and peripheral. They will not believe that such groups may have the fullness of Christ and should be allowed to possess all the resources and responsibilities of a local church** [my emphasis]. I believe that the parish structure will continue to minister to certain of the various areas of life... but it is the ‘little congregations’ which must become normative if the church is to respond to the Spirit’s movement in the life of the world” [my emphasis].

OF THE HOUSE CHURCH TODAY

1. MELTDOWN OF THE 'INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH'....
2. MELTDOWN OF THE 'FAMILY' WORLDWIDE...
3. THE 'FELLOWSHIP CRISIS' IN CHRISTENDOM TODAY...
4. POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION OF THE MISSIONAL CHURCH...

The writer has have chosen to highlight four major factors, which stand out above others, as reasons favouring the re-emergence of the house church today.

1. FIRST MAJOR FACTOR FAVOURING THE RE-EMERGENCE OF HOUSE CHURCH TODAY: MELTDOWN OF THE 'INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH'

Preamble on church as 'institution' and the general tendency to 'institutionalism.'

Dulles, a strong proponent of the 'institutional Church' (1987, pp.34-46), very simply says that this view of the church "defines the Church primarily in terms of its visible structures, especially the rights and powers of its officers" (1987, p.34). Dulles is committed to the institutional view of the Church but admits the dangers of 'institutionalism' (i.e. making the institution primary to the Church), a danger to the Church in every age (1987, p.35).³³

Getz has dealt helpfully with 'Institutionalism in History' (1976, p.193ff). He warns against falling into the trap of institutionalism – what makes this pitfall so dangerous is that it is not a phenomenon exclusively related to the church or other religious organizations, for it seems to happen naturally wherever you have people who band

³³ Dulles (1987, pp.44-45) admits the struggle of an institutional ecclesiology in our time. "In an age when all large institutions are regarded with suspicion or aversion, it is exceptionally difficult to attract people to a religion that represents itself as primarily institutional... Institutions are seen as self-serving and repressive and as needing to be kept under strong vigilance... Fulfillment and significance are things that an individual usually finds more in the private than in the public sphere, more in the personal than in the institutional."

together to achieve certain objectives. “People, plus structure, plus age, seemingly, more often than not, equals institutionalism” (1976, p.193). Getz writes on institutionalism in the secular world and the signs thereof: the organization (the form and structure) becomes more important than the people who make up the organization; individuals begin to function in the organization more like cogs in a machine; individuality and creativity are lost in the structural mass; the structural arrangements in the organization become rigid and inflexible; institutionalism has affected the people of God. He examines this tendency in Roman Catholicism, Reformation Churches, the Free Church Movement, the Church At Large, and the Evangelical Church (1976, pp.196-200). His conclusion? – clearly we are in danger of confusing form and function, and moving rapidly in the direction of becoming thoroughly institutionalized (so often, as movements grow and become enlarged, structure and form become rigid and inflexible – in the fact, their means and ways of doing things eventually become ends in themselves, as sacred in the minds of people as their beliefs) (1976, p.201).

1.1.

The effect of ‘postmodernism’ on the church.

Conservative evangelicals are concerned [sometimes rightly] about postmodernism and its influences on the institutional church. We examine the subject of postmodernity, as relating to the church, more fully.

For a **concise definition** of postmodernism, the reader is referred to the footnote on p.13 of this dissertation.

A simple *Google* search on the Internet reveals **postmodernism as a worldview with the following values:**³⁴ spirituality, pluralism, the experiential, relativity, altruism, community, creativity, the arts, environmentalism, globality, holism, authenticity, etc. This culture has transitioned from modernism’s values of rationalism, science, dogmatism, individualism, capitalism, compartmentalism and veneered religiosity (The resource encourages the church to run with those aspects that are intrinsic values to the

³⁴ Postmodernism and Christianity – Research Resources, 2010. *Research Resources for Christianity’s relevancy in today’s culture*. Source: Leffel, J., (n.d.). *Postmodernism: The ‘Spirit of the Age.’* Available at: <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/p02.html> [Accessed 10/03/2010].

Christian worldview, e.g. the search for spirituality, community, creativity, authenticity, etc ³⁵).

Postmodernity has resulted in a backlash against reason in our culture, especially in educational circles, e.g. when one claims to be in possession of the truth (especially religious truth), it is not acceptable and ends up 'repressing people.' Rejecting 'objective truth' is one of the cornerstones of much postmodernism. Postmodernists argue that we view reality through the lens of culture – all of our thinking is contextual to our community with which we identify, i.e. we are 'social constructs.'

Back to the **effects of postmodernism on the institutional church...**

Gibbs (2001, pp.19-20), an evangelical, mentions the devastating effects on the institutional church of the Information Age, postmodern thought, globalization and pluralism. He tables detailed statistics of mainline denominational decline [ensuing pages of this dissertation will demonstrate the same]. Gibbs points to a number of key-factors:

1.1.1.

Postmodern people are not locked into power structures (2001, pp.38-39). They see those who shoulder the responsibility for the functioning and survival of hierarchies and local churches as being too preoccupied in bailing out the boat to be setting a new course. The institution's worst reaction is a conspiracy of silence produced by corporate denial.

Postmodernists therefore distrust institutional authority (2001, pp.72-74). They see issues of 'control,' and denominational leaders often protecting and consolidating their position by creating rules that strip subordinates of their independence. Leaders within an hierarchical structure see their rôle as delegating and granting permission.

Bureaucracy has certainly worked against Christian ministry (2001, p.226). The church began as a movement driven by a vision. It consisted of small groups of people who believed that Jesus was the Son of God and who had committed themselves to Him.

³⁵ See Brian McLaren's *The Church on the Other Side*, referred to extensively when dealing with 'the emerging church' in chapter four of this dissertation.

Denominational hierarchies *must* recognize that churches do not exist to support them; they exist to facilitate local churches (2001, p.228).^{36 37}

1.1.2.

*Christianity Today*³⁸ of November 2000 published an interview with six postmodern Christians on the topic of the possibilities and limits of postmodernism: these included Carlos Aguilar, Vincent Bacote, Andy Crouch, Catherine Crouch, Sherri King and Chris Simmons.

They identified **some positive things about a postmodern Christian view of things:**

- Bacote emphasised the helpfulness of postmodernity in hearing the voices of the marginalised, e.g. women, the poor, ethnic minorities, etc. He also mooted the importance of relationships. The church must therefore be incarnational, to use the phrase of some, “You might be the only Bible anyone reads, the only Jesus anyone ever sees.” We live that out as an applied incarnational theology.³⁹
- King said that in order to engage postmodern culture, we have to speak the language of the culture, and the language of the culture right now, at least in intellectual circles, is couched in postmodern terms.
- Simmons claimed that the pendulum always swings too far. Some postmoderns talk about not being able to know anything, that we live in an illusion, etc. “As a

³⁶ Gibbs and Coffee (2001, p.228) mention how Andrew Grove, CEO of Intel, appreciated the need to step outside of corporate culture, with its institutional constraints and tunnel vision, in order to discover what was happening in the world. He noted that it was not senior managers but middle managers – especially those who dealt with the outside world, such as those in sales – who were often the first to realize that what worked before does not quite work any more, that the rules are changing. In order to illustrate institutionalism, the authors write humorously of Lasse Halstrom’s comedy/romance film, *Chocolat*, depicting the extremely controlling local church in a French village which fractures and strains the life and relationships of the townspeople [the writer heartily recommends a viewing]. The DVD version of the film is available from any good DVD rental service.

³⁷ The above views are endorsed by Frost and Hirsch (2003, p.204).

³⁸ *Christianity Today*, 2000. *The Antimoderns*. Available at:

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/november13/7.74.html?start=2> [Accessed 10 March 2010].

³⁹ This view is endorsed by Simmons in another response in the above article. “The body matters, and the body is part of our identity and personality. It’s the way we experience the world as Christians – intimate relationships where we’re in each other’s presence, presenting Christ as God not at a distance but as God intimately involved, sweating, living in this world, dying on a cross physically... That’s a profound message for a postmodern world that is immersed in cyberreality. To have the flesh of God here is the profoundest statement we could make.”

Christian, I do not subscribe to that. The response to the naïveté of modernism has been to be overly cynical about knowledge... God has empowered us with the ability to know him and to know his world through our relationship with him.”

- Andy Crouch commented that a prophetic critique of a dominating, totalizing worldview is obviously not new. Jesus did that to Caesar. Crouch then appeals for a Cross-centred postmodern theology. The Cross is what guarantees the Christian gospel against the critiques of postmodernism, specifically the one that says all meta-narratives oppress. The gospel is a meta-narrative: it is ‘the greatest story ever told;’ it claims to tell the truth about the world. God in Christ becomes the other and endures the full experience of marginalization... What it means to be excluded, what it means to be crucified on the garbage heap – this is what the central figure in the story, indeed, the Author, the Person with all the power in the story, embraced...”
- Simmons referred to a book by Engel and Dyrness, *Changing the Mind of Missions*⁴⁰ which talks about how missions had been co-opted by modernism, by capitalist models of missions, which were about ‘dollars-per-soul’ approaches. It made the church passive as to Christ’s command to disciple all nations, as if it were a group of stockholders. Simmons went to mention Rwanda: 80% of Rwandans claimed to be Christians, yet this was a country that in 1994 witnessed one of the most brutal genocides in history. Christianity was a veneer laid over tribal hatred. Discipleship appears not to have taken place. In summary, numbers should not matter in missions, and numbers have been first in the modern missions movement. Numbers matter to marketing people, they should not matter to Christians. Jesus did not use a mass-market approach but disciplined twelve. If we listen to people from the Two-Thirds World, they tell us to keep “our Western stuff” and to be more biblical in missions, e.g. empowering indigenous leaders.

1.1.3.

From the above it begins to emerge **how the positives of postmodernity have in some ways empowered the house church movement**, and why the house church is

⁴⁰ Only detail given was that it was published by InterVarsity.

so appealing today. Amongst many other things [into which we will soon go in greater detail], house churches emphasise: the incarnation of our faith; discipleship; the importance of relationships and community; the importance of missionality, so that the church goes to the world in need instead of expecting the world to 'come to church,' the need to touch those on the margins; etc.

1.2.

The traditional/institutional church in many parts of the world, especially in the West, is in deep crisis in terms of life and relevance. This has powerfully accelerated the search for alternative experiences of church, including the house church. We examine a number of missiologists and theologians on this point.

1.2.1.

According to McClung (veteran missionary and promoter of 'simple church' groups in over 30 nations) (2008, pp.ix,xi):

- Some 53,000 people leave evangelical churches in the USA every week.
- Mega-churches often create a false picture of church growth [much of it is 'transfer growth'].
- churches generally are perceived to be irrelevant, making minimal impact on their culture.

Kreider and McClung (2007, p.62) give recent statistics of the institutional church, specifically in the USA:

- The USA ranks third behind China and India in the number of 'unsaved.' Evangelical churches have failed to gain an additional two percent of the American population in the past 50 years. In other words, USA churches are not even reaching their own children.
- Approximately 3,500 to 4,000 churches close their doors for the last time each year, while 1,100 to 1,500 churches are started each year.
- Churches that reach the un-churched are highly intentional, and they understand the culture. A large element of cultural awareness is understanding the

generation born between 1977-1994. Research indicates that only 4 percent of this group are Christians. Kreider and McClung (2007, p.62) conclude, “This is the most un-churched generation in America.”

1.2.2.

In the 1930's already Bonhoeffer (cited in Richardson, 2007, pp.106-108) voiced his disillusionment with what he called 'the empirical church.' Some were saying 'The Church is dead.' He was searching for the meaning of 'a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life in a religion-less world.' Clearly he was looking beyond the church in the form in which it then existed (including the Confessing Church in Germany) [N. Richardson has applied this to our own country, saying that likewise concrete, institutional churches in SA must develop the theological vision and engage in the practical challenges entailed in being *sanctorum communio* in Africa today]. Bonhoeffer was full of hope that such a church would one day materialize, for to him the church was the only hope for peace in the world. No organization or arrangement or military power could provide this.

1.2.3.

Barth, (cited in Gibbs and Coffee, 2001, pp.66-67) spoke about the 'sluggishness' of the church of his day. He saw this as a major problem – it took many forms, e.g. the theoretical analysis which failed to put ideas into practice, inertia, indecision, lack of vision and inventiveness, passing up opportunities and planning without implementation, etc.

1.2.4.

Brunner (cited in Dulles, 1987, p.48), in his *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, argued that the Church in the biblical sense (*Ecclesia*) was not an institution but a brotherhood (*Bruderschaft*); it was 'a pure communion of persons' (*Personengemeinschaft*). On this ground Brunner rejected all law, sacrament, and priestly office as incompatible with the true being of the Church.

1.2.5.

Moltmann (1978, p.14) pointed to the modern church as over-clericised, authoritarian, and statically structured. It squeezed the very life out of congregations when it should be a liberating mission. 'Where Jesus is there is life!' (1978, p.19). Large, established churches were strongly hierarchical and treated their people as mere 'sheep.' Despite the best attempts to become a church 'for the people' and 'for the world,' did 'the people' themselves have anything to say in these churches and in their programs? If we talk about bringing the church to the people, Moltmann said, we have to ask 'which church?' (1978, p.108). Hence his plea for the return of 'passion' to the church as well as a sense of 'community,' for without the formation of 'true communities' there is no answer to our world's dehumanization (1978, p.29). Power in the church must arise from 'the bottom up' (1978, pp.16-17). Already God was beginning to raise up 'open communities,' 'grassroots communities' to give hope to the people, groups which lived intensively with the gospel and their neighbours (in prayer and breaking of bread). Maybe, Moltmann suggested, one should put a moratorium on western missions and learn to 'live in common,' for shared poverty makes us rich, not divided wealth (1978, pp.62,110).

1.3.

The church *must* adjust to different eras in order to be relevant, without compromising the evangel.

Even Dulles (1987, pp.199-200), an institutionalist, writes that while the Church will not necessarily mirror the secular society of tomorrow, it will have to make adjustments in order to survive in the society of the future and to confront the members of that society with the gospel. It must take cognizance of social movements. This will demand (1987, pp.199-200): **modernization of church structures**; ecumenical interplay; internal pluralism; provisionality (i.e. the ability to respond creatively to the demands of new situations); voluntariness (i.e. the church ruling more by persuasion than force).

1.4.

Institutionalism appears to be a roadblock to the gospel in our day.

Snyder (2004, p.9) **questions seriously whether the church today can ever be renewed.** Yet he is hopeful, because of the resurrection of Christ, the present ministry of the Holy Spirit in those faithful communities of believers who have revealed the community of the King. Snyder is honest about the fact that one of the greatest roadblocks to the gospel is the 'institutional church' with its fads and irrelevant discussions instead of intimate relationships and spiritual experience. It tries to 'brew new wine instead of scrapping the old wineskins.'^{41 42}

Barna (2006, pp.36,49), is so cynical about the established church in his native USA that he says if we place all our hope in the 'local church' (conventional church) it is a misplaced hope. He writes of its demise in the USA by 2025. He writes about the current explosion of 'small groups' (2006, p.47). He points to God moving powerfully through 'spiritual mini-movements' outside of normal congregational connections, reaching literally millions of people. He includes here 'simple church' fellowships (i.e. house churches) which fulfil all the functions of a traditional congregation, Christian creative arts guilds, marketplace ministries, *cyberchurch*, etc (2006, p.65).

1.5.

Problems facing 'mainline' churches/denominations in particular.

Gibbs & Coffee (2001, p.70) name e.g. the maintenance of expensive bureaucratic structures and specialist personnel, aging congregations, shrinking numbers,

⁴¹ Snyder (1996, pp.23ff) in his *The Problem with Wineskins Today*, has a footnote which states that he is not here depreciating theology or the necessity for a proper emphasis on truth. His point is rather that neither theology nor structures must be permitted to eclipse the Person of Christ and the new life He offers.

⁴² Lategan (2004, pp.68-80) in his *Remarks on the Church in the Consumer Society: Similarities and Dissimilarities*, tries hard to make the church more relevant in the face of a consumeristic society (e.g. the church is seen by 'consumers' as a 'shopping mall,' the 'client' needs an 'experience,' churches need to 'brand their ceremonies,' etc.). However, his paper is strongly from the perspective of the institutional church [which in the writer's view needs radical changes in structure, etc], e.g. the central role of the 'minister,' his focal pulpit ministry, etc.

denominational leaders no longer being able to assume people's loyalty to institutions, etc. It is not enough, unfortunately, to go into a defensive stance:

“It is not a case of battening down the hatches until the storm has passed. What we are experiencing is not a short-lived turbulence but the dawn of a new era – or the creeping shadow heralding a new Dark Age, depending on your perspective... The present cultural upheaval from modernity to postmodernity (however the latter term is defined) will necessitate not merely the structural re-engineering of their denominations but their death and resurrection.”

1.6.

All is not well in the traditional church in South Africa. As elsewhere, church members are feeling a deep sense of alienation in current, traditional church structures.

Nel, a Namibian theologian (2002, pp.9,10,13,178ff), examines (largely) the Afrikaans-speaking church in SA and Namibia. He entitles his survey “*Op Soek na God... buite die kerk?*” He speaks of the church as our ‘mother’ and goes on to say that the ‘mother’ is sick, perhaps terminally so, and then gives many symptoms of and reasons for his diagnosis (he writes with regret because he loves the church greatly).⁴³

Churches/denominations have lost credibility, giving impetus to small groups and faith communities. Hendriks concludes (1995, p.31):

- A church/denomination that loses touch with the individual member foregoes the possibility of any growth.
- Mainline denominational structures, often backed by theological institutions, have to a certain extent overplayed their hand, lost credibility and become out of touch with people. They find it difficult to adapt to the changing circumstances. They still

⁴³ Nel (2002, pp.23ff,27,29) writes on the basis of many interviews and correspondence, underlining disillusionment with ‘religiosity’ (irrelevant institutionalism) in the church as opposed to authenticity, loving care and relevance to the needs of the world. The church is considered by many as ‘just another responsibility and burden they can do without.’ The church is seen as a building rather than God’s agent for meaningful change in the world.

try to dictate from above, instead of serving from below, as their agenda differs from that of people at grassroots level.

- The local congregation, more specifically the local faith community where primary socialization occurs – where believers are living with one another and faith values are embedded in virtue – is the dynamic point where church growth starts and where people learn how to face the future. Denominationalism, as elsewhere in the world, is on the decline.

In 1995 already Hendriks stated (1995, p.31), “the importance of small groups as primary socializing units, as faith communities, cannot be stressed enough.”

1.7.

SIMPLE SURVEY OF OPINIONS RE ALIENATION FELT IN THE CHURCH IN GENERAL, IN THE NELSON MANDELA METROPOLE AND ACROSS SOUTH AFRICA.

1.7.1.

Evidence compiled from a group of about 70-80 people, in response to the question, ‘WHY IS THE CHURCH [IN GENERAL] NOT EFFECTIVE TODAY?’

[This took place on Friday 26th March 2010, at a weekend seminar on ‘Discipleship,’ in Port Elizabeth. The group comprised many denominations and church traditions, a cross-section of cultures, age-groups. There was a scattering of out-of-town visitors. The main group was divided, for the purpose of discussion, into groups of 4-5 (max.), with some 30 minutes to discuss the question, and some 30 minutes to report back via an elected chairperson].

SUMMARISED RESPONSES INCLUDED:

Humanistic agendas; little intimacy, ‘fellowship;’ insufficient outreach/missionality/witness; self-centredness; infighting; consumerism; stifling traditionalism/bureaucracy; little of ‘the five-fold ministry’ (Eph. 4:11ff); much personal, spiritual ‘baggage’ (i.e. unresolved issues, emotional immaturity, etc); little true ‘discipleship’ of believers/new believers; lack of ‘relationship;’ dependence on clergy; little ‘priesthood of all

believers; little care (for one another); people feel 'condemned' by preaching and fellow-believers; little honesty and authenticity ('what will others think of me?'); etc.

1.7.2.

At the above seminar, the writer handed out a simple questionnaire, on a volunteer-response basis, comprising two responses:

1. Give five *major* reasons why I feel alienated from the conventional church (i.e. the traditional, denominational church...
2. For what five *major* reasons would I feel attracted to a group that practises church according to Acts 2:38-47, in principle at least?

SUMMARISED RESPONSES TO QUESTION 1, FROM 20 RESPONSES, INCLUDED

[higher ratings are in bold print]:

Little 'fellowship'/relationship/personal interaction (**6**); little 'recognition'/acceptance (I feel like a 'number' only) (4); little 'love' (2); little authenticity (I cannot 'be me') (5); negative criticism and gossip (3); denominationalism/institutionalism/bureaucracy vs a 'kingdom approach' (**11**); professionalism/traditionalism/'legalism'/conformity (**11**); focus on buildings/maintenance vs 'a concern for the lost' (3); boredom/monotony/'long sermons' (5); church seen as 'a place' only (3); restricted worship/expression (4); little personal participation and opportunity for response (3); church-attendance out of duty/habit (2); little spiritual growth in relation to God and others (**7**); personal 'burdens' not lifted (2); little Christ-centredness/Christo-centric vision (3); little knowledge/experience of the Holy Spirit and His workings (2); little prayerfulness (2); a sense of 'condemnation' by the preacher and others (3); dependency on a single leader/clergy (4); little evangelism/witness/mission opportunity (4); etc.

SUMMARISED RESPONSES TO QUESTION 2, FROM 23 RESPONSES, INCLUDED

[higher ratings are in bold print]:

Small groups (6); 'back to basics' (Acts, NT) (5); sense of love/acceptance/warmth/recognition (7); no discrimination/judgment (race/economics/social standing/spirituality/personal) (3); freedom to participate/'share' (9); feeling of 'liberty' (freedom of expression/'to be me') (7); intimacy (17); spiritual gifts are allowed to operate (4); more witness/evangelism/mission opportunities (6); personal accountability (vs consumerism, etc) (4); a sense of the Holy Spirit's presence and guidance (4); sense of 'family' (5); use of homes and hospitality (3); sense of vitality/enthusiasm/'fun' (6); serving the practical needs of others (e.g. food, etc) (2); the introverted/reserved are empowered (3); Christo-centricity of life and gatherings (3); authenticity (3); more prayer (2); focus on the kingdom of God (4).

1.8.

Where did things go wrong for the church in general?

Most would respond, with the formalization of the church under the influence of the Roman Emperor, Constantine (274/280-337 AD). He granted Christians a heavily favoured position in society.

“In virtually an instant, Christianity moved from being a marginalized, subversive, and persecuted movement secretly gathering in houses and catacombs to being the favoured religion in the empire. *Everything changed!* [my emphasis] ... With the edict of Milan, the age of the missional-apostolic church had come to an end. Things were to be very different from then on...” (Frost and Hirsch, 2003, p.8). While we now find ourselves in a post-Christendom context, the Western church still operates for the most part in the Constantinian ‘Christendom mode.’”

To illustrate this Frost and Hirsch add a helpful diagram (2003, pp.8-9)...

<i>Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Mode</i> (A.D. 32 to 313)	<i>Advance and Triumph of Christendom Mode</i> (313 to current)	(Emerging) <i>Missional Mode</i> (past 10 years)
Didn't have dedicated sacral buildings. Often underground and persecuted.	Buildings become central to the notion, and experience, of church.	Rejects the concern and need for dedicated "church" buildings.
Leadership operating with a fivefold ministry-leadership ethos.	Leadership by an institutionally ordained clergy operating primarily in a pastor-teacher mode.	Leadership embraces a pioneering-innovative mode including a fivefold ministry-leadership ethos. Non-institutional by preference.
Grassroots, decentralized movement.	Institutional-hierarchical notion of leadership and structure.	Grassroots, decentralized movements.
Communion celebrated as a sacralized community meal.	Increasing institutionalization of grace through the sacraments.	Redeems, re-sacralizes, and ritualizes new symbols and events, including the meal.
Church is on the margins of society and underground.	Church is perceived as central to society and surrounding culture.	Church is once again on the fringes of society and culture. The church re-embraces a missional stance in relation to culture.
Missionary, incarnational-sending church.	Attractional / "extractional."	Missional, incarnational-sending church.

To remedy the situation, according to Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.14-16,209), we need again to become a missional/incarnational church, in other words **move from an essentially institutional body to an essentially Incarnational/missional body**, made up of many 'gospel communities' that transform their culture. Theologically it would look like this: CHRISTOLOGY MISSIOLOGY ECCLESIOLOGY.

Others, like Simson (1998, pp.57-58), speak of Constantine's 'professionalizing the church,' with succeeding years seeing the approval of priests 'licensed' to conduct weddings and other functions in a more professional, public manner. The church experienced the doubtful blessing of being equipped with a 'mediatorial caste' between

itself and God. The church needed to be fit for the king and his company – that meant cathedrals and not shabby houses.

“The great divide between clergy and laity not only emerged, but was sanctioned, institutionalized, sealed and protected by the state, an error that has cost the lives of millions of martyrs right up to the present day, killed by the hand of secular soldiers, at the instigation of ‘properly organized and registered’ advocates of Christendom. The church had gladly accepted national graduation from a persecuted cult to a state-prescribed religion, and lost its prophetic power over social, cultural and pagan habits in the process.”

Furthermore, in AD 380, bishops Theodosius and Gratian ordered one, state-recognised orthodox church and one set of faith – the orthodox dogma. Each Roman citizen was forced to be a member and was made to believe in the *lex dei*, the law of faith. Other groups and movements – including those meeting in homes – were forbidden. That meant the legal end of the house church.^{44 45}

1.9.

Some practical considerations (resulting from the demise of the institutional church), which have accelerated the quest for alternative forms of church.

1.9.1.

It is important to note that for a few decades now youth generally have voted ‘for Jesus’ but ‘against the church.’

⁴⁴ Richardson (2007, p.115), in his ‘Sanctorum Communio in a Time of Reconstruction?’ comments on the pre-Constantinian and post-Constantinian church and the need for separation of church and state, citing Bonhoeffer and Hauerwas in this regard.

⁴⁵ For a fuller exploration of Constantine’s association with/influence on the church, see Latourette (1953, pp. 91-93).

Gibbs and Coffee (2001, p.72) affirm that this trend has been coming awhile,⁴⁶ certainly in the West: it is seen in the widespread distrust of social institutions (including government), the military, business and the church, especially in the aftermath of the Viet Nam debacle. In Britain, rejection of authority and institutions is stronger than ever.⁴⁷ “The profound sense of distrust toward institutions held by boomers and ‘GenXers’ has clear implications for the church. Its authority base must be less positional and far more **relational** than in previous generations” (2001, p.72).⁴⁸

Those closely involved with youth ministry (Pearce, 2005, pp.51-52), tell us that young people today have a desire for authenticity rather than organized, formal religion that appears (and often is) un-authentic. Traditional churches’ set form of service clashes with diversity and expression... they have no time for church councils and constitutions and ignorance of ‘real’ issues in society.

Thus youth in many places are gravitating to small groups and house churches and similar communities, as they long for connectedness and creative expression. These ‘small churches’ are probably the best counter to bureaucratic church government, top-down solutions, institutionalism and stagnation. [If only the church had heeded Barth (cited in Edwards, n.d., pp.105-110,119) when he said, “Religion is for unbelievers; it’s the business of the godless.”⁴⁹].

In the 1960’s already, young people (Racoczy, 2007, p.56), reacting against ecclesiastical structures, were flocking to communities such as Taize in France to

⁴⁶ In 1976 already Dr. Michael Griffiths [whom the writer was privileged to have teach on the Letter to the Ephesians at the church he was pastoring at the time], then General Director of OMF, stated in his *Cinderella with Amnesia – A Practical Discussion on the Relevance of the Church* (1976, p.20): “The institutional church has become so disfigured, and the young generation so disenchanted with it, that we have become unrecognizable. This is an issue which we must tackle... – how the new community can again become recognizable for what it really is.”

⁴⁷ Snyder (2004, p.39) in his *The Community of the King*, refers to Jesus’ significant rejection of both religious and political hierarchy, as seen e.g. in Matthew 20:20-28 and 23:1-12. Christ’s followers are seen as brothers and sisters and fellow servants. They were not to ‘lord’ things over one another.

⁴⁸ Part of the writer’s theological training was ‘never to have close friends in your own congregation.’ While the matter obviously must be handled wisely, what does this say about the church as ‘family’?

⁴⁹ Edwards is scathing re typical Western church government with its many regulations, rules and punishments. He traces some of this back to Calvin’s governing of Geneva via ‘Christ’s Magistrates.’ He quotes Gabriel Vahanian, “We live in a post-Christian era, but only because Christianity has sunk into religiosity.”

experience the simple blessings of prayer and reflection with their peers, finding purpose in their life and serving the poor.

1.9.2.

A word about institutional church preaching. [note, typical 'Sunday preaching' *can* be practised in the house church, but it is not the norm].^{50 51}

Many agree (Codrington & Swartz, 1999, p.123) that in a post-modern era, "Long one-way sermons will no longer communicate. Instead methods need to be innovative, short and interactive."

Hull makes an excellent point (1994, pp.95-96):

"The most common myth is that effective preaching leads to effective ministry."⁵² Effective preaching is a good start to the process, but falls far short of effective ministry. Over 90 percent of pastors must face the reality that preaching is not enough. It is not enough for the top 10 per cent either, but they usually aren't required to confront their reality. While many pastors will agree that preaching is not enough, they do not consider it their responsibility to fill in the gaps... Telling people what to do without providing the means to do it is cruel and defrauding. It creates spiritual schizophrenia, Christians who are experts on what they are not experiencing... When an army never goes to war, it by necessity focuses on shining boots, making beds, and marching in a straight line..."

⁵⁰ After close on 40 years of preaching, and as a believer in 'the primacy of preaching' (under the influence of Martyn Lloyd-Jones and others), the writer is persuaded that with our two traditional sermons per Sunday we have virtually 'preached people to death.' I am not hereby discarding 'the foolishness of preaching.' There is currently much research with regard to the relevancy of preaching as traditionally practised: e.g. *The Problem With Preaching* by David Allis. (Available at: <http://www.edgenet.org.nz/ideasfromedge/problemwithpreaching.htm> [Accessed 11/04/2008]). I believe we must also distinguish between 'preaching' and 'teaching,' as referred to in Eph. 4:11ff.

⁵¹ Edwards (n.d., pp.65,68,88) in his *How To Meet in Homes*, is once more scathing about our "almost 500 years of trying to practise our faith with a pulpit and neat benches all in a row."

⁵² The writer will never forget one of his lecturers at Seminary telling us in our final year of training, 'Just teach your people, and you'll be alright...' I believed that and practised it for many years, until I realized, somewhat painfully, that preaching/teaching, no matter how well done, was not enough and fell short of equipping the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4).

Lundy (2005, p.84) has indicated, under the heading *Soft Apologetics*, the use Paul made of dialogue in the witness of the early church. Note Paul's method of witness to the Athenians: *So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the market-place day by day with those who happened to be there* (Acts 17:17). The word 'reasoned' here is a translation of a derivative from the verb, *dielegeto*, from which we get the English word *dialogue*. Lundy then mentions the value added through the soft apologetics of dialogue:

- Interactive learning is generally more effective when people are not highly motivated to listen to a preaching monologue.⁵³
- Feedback from the audience helps us to clarify how what we are saying is being 'heard.'
- Dialogue does increase our opportunity to learn about the faith of others.
- Dialogue moves the passive hearer further along the continuum toward her or his will being challenged as emotions and reasoning skills are aroused.

Kinnamen (cited in Barna, 2007, pp.1-3) says re teens,

"Helping them connect with God, learn about their faith, and serve others, in a **loving and relational environment** [my emphasis] are their top desires from a church. Keep in mind that young people are not transformed merely by attending a church, knowing a few Bible stories or being friends with the youth pastor. It takes addressing teens on a much deeper, personal level – such as developing their intellect and vocational passions as well cultivating their curiosities for the complexities of life."

⁵³ Often this kind of 'dialogue' is the tool used for teaching in the house church scenario, with much effectiveness in the writer's experience as one who has been in both 'camps,' viz. pulpit-ministry and small group ministry.

1.9.3.

Another practical issue arising out of the demise of the institutional church as against the resurgence of simple/house church worldwide, is the usefulness or hindrance of **'church buildings.'**

Because church buildings are so much part of the institutional church and its ministry, we must ask, are these a help or a stumbling-block to reaching our youth/people in general today? It seems to the writer that, although not wrong *per se*, 'church buildings' have often contributed to the breakdown of fellowship and life. While 'church buildings' may be worshipful, etc., they are generally not made for fellowship - whereas homes are.

An interesting historical point: after the phenomenal success of Wesley's class meetings (essentially house churches), slowly but surely, Methodism began again to emphasise Sunday morning congregational church meetings in buildings according to Anglican patterns. Kreider (cited in Simson, 1998, p.71) notes, "As they de-emphasised the accountable relationships they had in their class meetings, the revival movement began to decline."

Writing on 'The Building of God,' Watson (1978, pp.117-118) put it bluntly:

"Material church buildings can often be no more than monuments of religion. They can often fail to speak of the reality of the living God. And this is not surprising, since that is the privilege and responsibility of God's people when they truly become the temple of the Holy Spirit" (Jn. 14:17, 14:23, 1 Cor. 3:16)...Certainly, from a purely practical point of view, buildings may be necessary for a meeting place for God's people; but all too easily they can become the first step towards the static institutionalism that Christ came to abolish." ⁵⁴

Under the general heading 'Are Church Buildings Superfluous?' Snyder (1996, pp.66ff,69ff) details some cogent arguments in favour of the use of homes and other venues. For example, he speaks about the 'witness' of church buildings to the church's

⁵⁴ Elsewhere we talk about the experience of the *transcendence and immanence of God* [see Beckham, 2000, pp.60-61, for a helpful understanding of this subject] – note this has nothing to do necessarily with 'church buildings.'

general immobility, inflexibility, lack of fellowship, pride and class divisions. He even suggests that for many churches it would be advantageous to sell their buildings.

Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.152ff), under the heading 'The Medium is the Message,' see buildings as a limitation on incarnational ministry. "We shape our buildings and then our buildings shape us." In fact so profoundly, they add, that we can hardly grasp the real impact buildings have had on our consciousness and social patterns. They have virtually imprisoned us, separated 'them' and 'us,' hampered mission, produced (especially our mega-church auditoriums) a consumer mentality, etc. Their advice? 'Sell the building and free your congregation or rework it missionally so that its effect will be missional.'

Garrison (1999, pp.13-16,46-47), in a Southern Baptist study of **church-planting movements**, reveals that church buildings and institutions can contribute to such, but they can also become stumbling blocks. For example, in late 1992, in a certain South American country unsympathetic to the Christian faith, a severe economic crisis occurred [how relevant to us just now], impacting churches planted by Southern Baptist missionaries. This crisis prevented church members from travelling significant distances to their church buildings for worship, and thus the movement was at a crossroads: they could resign themselves to a 'churchless faith,' or respond creatively to the challenge. These Baptists chose the latter as they moved their meetings into **homes** and found that growth greatly accelerated. In fact, during the first year (1992-1993), the Northern Convention in this country alone started 237 house churches and hundreds began to respond to the missionary call within their own country.

[Often, from a very practical point of view, when we (almost) instantly provide church buildings for new congregations, we may be saddling them with an external burden they are ill-equipped to carry, especially in the two-thirds world. ⁵⁵]

1.9.4.

Another practical issue: has the institutional church (besides the power of 'secularism') consciously/unconsciously fostered individualism and consumerism, so detrimental to church life?

⁵⁵ The writer has witnessed this first hand in his own denomination, with resultant run-down church buildings with very few people in them on Sundays or during the week.

Anderson (2006, p.178) believes so, referring us to McLaren's point on the mission of the church as follows: Christians are not the end users of the gospel – therefore there is a need for emerging churches to be a community driven by mission to the world in order to avoid becoming a community seeking to gratify its own self-interest at the expense of the world. The 'what's in it for me' syndrome, McLaren claims, turns the church into a purveyor of religious goods and services designed to keep its own members from shopping around for a church that 'meets my need better.'⁵⁶ In any case, as Anderson (2006, pp.218-219) points out later in his book, is the Christian faith not rather a matter of *being* the church, not just going to church? Is it not about being a 'family,' with domestic as well as public practice of the kingdom of God?

"Being the church is as much a transformation of the secular sphere into sacred service as it is filling the sanctuary with ordinary saints. The Spirit of Christ has provided all the parts – some assembly is required."

Peterson is also helpful here when he writes about 'the Jesus way' in contrast to 'the Western way' (2007, p.6):

"The great American innovation in congregation is to turn it into a consumer enterprise. We Americans have developed a culture of acquisition, an economy that is dependent on wanting more, *requiring* more. We have a huge advertising industry designed to stir up appetites we didn't even know we had. We are insatiable.

It didn't take long for some of our Christian brothers and sisters to develop consumer congregations. If we have a nation of consumers, obviously the quickest and most way to get them into our congregations is to identify what they want and then offer it to them, satisfy their fantasies, promise them the moon,⁵⁷ recast the gospel in consumer

⁵⁶ The way many churches today pander to this kind of philosophy (of individualism & consumerism) by trying to provide the best, the greatest, in comparison to their neighbour-church down the road, is in the writer's sad to say the least – the writer believes that much of the blame must be laid at the feet of 'senior pastors' [the writer was one] who are more interested in the size of their church than the honour of God. See, e.g., Amos's scathing rebuke of the religious centres of his time, competing with one another! (Amos 5).

⁵⁷ Sickening to the writer personally is the impact this mentality has on some of the poorest of the poor in our cities and townships, often the prey of flashy N. American preachers arriving in helicopters, or local

terms: entertainment, satisfaction, excitement, adventure, problem-solving, whatever. This is the language we Americans grow up on, the language we understand. We are the world's champion consumers, so why shouldn't we have state-of-the-art consumer churches? ...

There is only one thing wrong: this is not the way in which God brings us into conformity with the life of Jesus and sets us on the way of Jesus' salvation. This is not the way in which we become less and Jesus becomes more. This is not the way in which our sacrificed lives become available to others in justice and service. The cultivation of consumer spirituality is the antithesis of a sacrificial, 'deny yourself' congregation. **A consumer church is an antichrist church**" [my emphasis].

1.9.5.

In the face of the failures of the traditional church in these many areas, the need for reformation into multipliable, organic/simple house churches becomes a serious option.

Simson (2006, p.31) has pleaded very recently for a reformation of the church into multipliable, organic house churches with an apostolic focus, commissioned to saturate groups and whole regions of the world with the good news.

1.10.

In summary...

It is clear that institutionalism in the church is subtle and pervasive in its influence, and therefore even house churches or house church networks may succumb to the disease. However, it is true that there are some principles built into house churches, e.g. every-member ministry, the priesthood of all believers, simplicity, flat leadership structures, etc, founded on the basic ecclesiology of the NT, that will more easily militate against the tendency to the institutionalism of modernity. One could argue that the traditional church's failure to adapt is precisely why the church has generally, over the centuries,

preachers 'dressed up to the nines,' wooing the crowds with pseudo-American accents – who among the truly poor would not want to be financially prosperous, dress only in silk shirts and drive luxury cars?

failed to fulfil 'The Great Commandment' of Matthew 22:37ff and 'The Great Commission' of Matthew 28:18-20.

2. THE SECOND MAJOR REASON FOR THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE HOUSE CHURCH IN OUR TIME: THE WORLDWIDE MELTDOWN OF THE FAMILY

PREAMBLE...

We are facing, perhaps as never before, **a loss of perspective of 'family' as central to creation, the gospel of the kingdom and our purpose on earth.** In this area also, the re-emergence of the house church, built around the family-unit, is playing/will play an increasingly important role, i.e. in the restoration of 'family.' Many years ago, the revival leader Jonathan Edwards (18th century N. American awakening) perceptively said, "Every Christian family ought to be, as it were, a little church" (Kreider & McClung, 2007, p.113).⁵⁸

2.1.

A dearth of 'theology of family.'

According to Anderson and Guernsey (1985, pp.15,18) there has been a dearth of 'theology of family.' Scriptures such as Genesis 12:3 and Ephesians 3:14-15 "suggest a quintessential order of the family, and that God himself is the quintessence...God continues to be the formative presence and power for the social structure of his people."

2.1.1.

The creation mandate and family.

Christensen (1986, p.5) reminds us that the focus of creation is on the *family*, and while marriage is never raised to a sacrament it is part of God's plan and intended to be

⁵⁸ Roman Catholic theologian, Dulles (1987, p.218), in dealing with the Church as a community of disciples, refers to Pope John Paul II's expatiation on the family as 'Church in miniature.' Dulles adds that too many people still look upon the Church as only a huge, impersonal institution set over against its members. He admits that even Catholics who are faithful to their religious obligations rarely experience Church as a community of mutual support and stimulation.

“the most important social institution and the cradle of every culture. The gospel creates Christian families. The church must teach and model unapologetically the value of family. The health of the church (and society at large) is dependant on its strenuous efforts to preserve and strengthen the family... Churches which understand Christ’s agenda will not usurp the responsibility of families in their programming. The church must recognize that its foundational leadership will come from Christian *homes* (my emphasis).”

2.1.2.

The dire state of families today.

To return to Anderson and Guernsey (1985, p.152),

“Far too many ‘family units,’ as statistics on the latest census reports, are actually islands of quiet despair in the sea of humanity. And this is often at their best! More often, life in these families is demeaning and destructive to human personhood itself. No, it is the *household of faith* [my emphasis] which is the sanctification of marriage and family, as well as of the unmarried and non-family persons.”

2.2.

A more communal approach to church and family.

According to Banks (2004, p.241-242) there are many ways in which a more communal approach to small church and congregational life can help counter tendencies in our society toward greater fragmentation. The support system provided by a *home church* can play a major role in the improvement of communication between parents and their children, strengthening of marriages, provision of varied and concrete roles for children, provision of singles with a familial – and families with a less nuclear – environment. Given the increasing incidence of divorce (among Christians as well as others), this makes for a major contribution to the foundation of the whole social fabric. It is becoming increasingly clear that children of single parent families tend to run into more problems and generally achieve less than others. In certain settings, such as the African-American

context, restoration of the family is a pre-eminent concern. An extended Christian family approach to small churches and the understanding of 'congregation' as primarily a 'clan' could play a significant role in ameliorating the problems mentioned.

2.2.1.

The church as a 'family community.'

Griffiths (1976, pp.82ff), expounding Ephesians, has pointed to the terrible effects of an infant growing up without the loving environment of family, i.e. acceptance, affection, care, etc. We know of the problems that even afflict adults who have been isolated for long periods in solitary confinement or on a desert island. Spiritual isolationism is equally devastating. One of the problems has been our neglect of the Bible's emphasis on the corporate aspects of salvation. Ephesians 2:19 and Galatians 6:10 are real pictures of the intimacy of the family in its warmth and security. **This is what a congregation ought to be** – a place where we feel safe, can be ourselves, and have no need to be boarded up behind a façade, a place where we are cared for and care for one another. We have made 'going to church' more like a public occasion with pomp and circumstance instead of a family gathering. Even the Lord's Supper has tended to degenerate into a formal ceremony and lost its quality of being a family feast (1976, pp.85-86).

Griffiths takes us to Ephesians 5:18ff and deals with the issue of the Spirit-filled life beginning, in many ways, with the home, where we are subject to and serve one another as spouses and parents and children. This has a great deal to do with our worship and 'our life together' in the congregation. All this also points to **our mistake of talking about church and about family as if the two are totally different compartments.** "Family life is not a separate compartment from church life, but an intrinsic part of it" (1976, p.89).⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Grudem (1994, p.940) comments thus on the relationship between family and church: The NT makes frequent connections between the life of the family and the life of the church, e.g. 1 Timothy 3:5, "If a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church?" also 1 Timothy 5:1-2, "Do not rebuke an older man but exhort him as you would a *father*; treat younger men like *brothers*, older women like *mothers*, younger women like *sisters*, in all purity;" etc. The close relationship between family and church is very clear.

Griffiths (1976, pp.85ff,92ff) then deals with the limitations of peer group Christianity, the family as a divinely instituted unity of community, concluding: “The Christian family is to be seen as the congregation in miniature. Those who are chosen to rule in the congregation as elders must first prove themselves in ruling their homes as a mini-congregation (1 Tim. 3:4,5). As Christians deeply concerned to develop the new community, let us see that the perfecting of the new community must begin in the home, in our relations with our life-partners and with our children. The life of heaven is to be tasted first in the mini-congregation” (1976, p.99).

2.3.

Postmodern society: youth, family and church.

2.3.1.

Codrington and Swartz (1999, pp.125-126) speak of modern youth as ‘Aliens to Traditional Family Structures:’ therefore “The church of the twenty first century needs to be a warm, welcoming and loving family. A place of nurture and not of judgment or of insistence on outward conformity... Family needs to be re-defined and re-modelled in the church – and people helped to learn Godly principles of family life both inside the church and in their own homes and partnerships.”

2.3.2.

Pearce (2005, pp.50-51,57) mentions **youth’s search for identity**, finding that their hope of enjoying “a stable family one day... is limited.” There is confusion about gender: e.g. that of the husband as ‘head of the home’ is often being replaced by a single mother who has to take the role of ‘father’ and ‘mother,’ thus teenagers are constantly in search of their sexual identity and gender roles. Pearce makes a plea for a ‘Family Based Youth Ministry’ where the family is the key target and focus of the entire church. He names possible options, including the thought of adults (‘spiritual fathers and mothers’) mentoring young people in the church, especially those who are ‘un-churched.’ He also indicates that one of the problems in the traditional church is that of the separation of

youth and family - youth need to be coming into a 'family church' rather than just a 'youth group.'⁶⁰

2.3.3.

Lundy (2005, pp.63-64) draws attention to **the growth of the house and cell church movement in our day:**

"The emerging generation of the under-thirties is rapidly moving from a post-Christendom to a pre-Christian culture. Among them classic cell church is working well. Driven by dysfunctionality in the home and cynicism about the ulterior motives of corporations and government, young postmoderns tune out those with whom they have not formed a close relationship and in whom they have not learned to trust. Small groups or tribes work for them. On the other side of the world, take China for instance, where it is estimated that twenty thousand people daily become believers, most of those are added through house groups. If non-western people, let alone postmodern people who are predominantly in the western world, focus on building community and relationships to the exclusion of individualism and institutional loyalty, we should not be surprised that missional churches will understand the power of the small group to reach the lost by satisfying *that need for belonging*" [my italics].

2.4.

The call back to family.

Kreider (2000, pp.94-95) is convinced that,

"although for the past 1700 years, much of the church of Jesus Christ has strayed from the truth of relational restoration between fathers and sons, the Lord is breathing a fresh word in our generation to His people. Rather than having the focus on meetings and buildings which promote *programs* to encourage the spiritual growth of believers, He is calling us back to be His *family* and get back to the New Testament truth of building families.

⁶⁰ The writer recalls gratefully the seminary lectures and subsequent writings of Dr. R.W. Christensen which emphasized so much the mentoring role of *elders* in the church as far as family is concerned.

Many believers are meeting house to house in small groups throughout the world because the Lord is restoring this sense of family to the body of Christ. Christians are again beginning to relive the book of Acts. They are seeing the importance of empowering and parenting the next generation... Jesus wants His church to be restored to the New Testament pattern of family life” (2000, p.94).

3. THE THIRD MAJOR REASON FOR THE RE-EMERGENCE OF HOUSE CHURCH AT THIS TIME: THE LACK OF *KOINONIA* (COMMUNITY) IN THE CHURCH TODAY (especially the Western Church)

3.1.

The common malady of ‘church without community.’

Moltmann (1978, pp.113,121,125) expressed the concern that ‘church’ was being experienced as being *without community* and was rather being experienced as ‘institution.’ The Reformation had promised the ‘priesthood of all believers’ but had not delivered on that, as could be seen in the church’s hierarchies, clergy, organization, structures, etc. Moltmann continued,

“the social isolation of the individual has become a kind of mass sickness” and that ultimately everything would depend on the “emergence of small, freely constituted, comprehensible communities in the large, incomprehensible districts [of the German State church – which had continued in the ‘Constantinian format’], for ‘community’ exists only where people really know each other.”

Even, Bonhoeffer (1960, pp.41,72) in his *Communio Sanctorum* had written about the church being community since the Book of Genesis – the immediate community of God

was documented in the immediate community of man. Unfortunately with the loss of immediate community with God their (Adam and Eve's) immediate social community was also lost. Whereas the previous spiritual form (of relationships) had grown up upon the basis of love, the Fall changed this to selfishness. This gave rise to the break in immediate communion with man... Whereas the primal relationship of man to man is a giving one, in the state of sin it is purely demanding... each man lives his own life, instead of all living the same God-life. All the natural forms of community remain, but are corrupt in their innermost core.

Dulles (1987, p.48) points out how Bonhoeffer developed the notion of the Church as an interpersonal community, which is constituted by the complete self-forgetfulness of love. The relationship between 'I and thou' is no longer essentially a demanding but a giving one. On this subject of community Dulles also quotes Kuhns (1987, pp.229-230):

"Bonhoeffer's thinking on the Church as community has not received the attention it deserves. The failure is unfortunate, because Bonhoeffer's identification of the Church with personal community is surely as revolutionary as his later definition of the Church in terms of its going out into the world... what makes Bonhoeffer's thought on community so relevant and significant to Catholics is the fact that no Catholic theologian has cut to the central issue of identifying the Church as community so consciously as Bonhoeffer has."

More recently, Rakoczy (2007, p.50) and Richardson (2007, pp.103-104) have highlighted Bonhoeffer's contribution on 'community':

- Rakoczy indicates that Bonhoeffer's clearest exposition of his ecclesiology and specifically his thoughts on 'community,' are found in the first chapter of his classic, *Life Together*. The latter is a clear exposition of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology in terms of *communion & community*, lived together in and under the Word who is Jesus Christ. It is really a distillation of the vision of early community life as described in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-34).

- Richardson (2007, pp.103-104) adds, “a tide of western individualism seems to be swamping even the communality of traditional African life as people are swept along on the wave of urbanization,” pointing out that such individualism was firmly rejected by Bonhoeffer.⁶¹ He saw the church as best understood as ‘Christ existing as *community*’ [my emphasis] and as the ‘ongoing work of the *incarnation*’ [my emphasis].

Dulles points to the value of *primary communities of faith* (1987, p.219): in an earlier day, when the general culture of Europe and the West was heavily imbued with Christian meanings and values, it may have been less urgent to have *vigorous primary communities of faith*. The mass culture purveyed by the popular press and the media is preponderantly based on the pursuit of pleasure, wealth, and power. It is in many respects alien to Christian attitudes and ideas. Occasional contacts with religious institutions are insufficient to make the individual feel at home with the symbols of the faith. “Hence there is need for communities in which people can experience a full Christian environment...” (1987, p.219).

Schaeffer (1970, pp.88ff) wrote of people looking to believers to produce something that will bring the world to a standstill – human beings treating human beings like human beings.

“The church should be able to do this, because we know who we are and we know who they are – first, man made in the image of God, then brothers within the church and Christian community on the basis of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1970, pp.88-89).

⁶¹ Others mentioning the modern/post-modern curse of individualism include Fee (1996, pp.63,188) and R and J Banks. The latter (2004, pp.88-89) in their *The Church Comes Home* point out how this is fed by the media and has infected the church. Thus Christians judge churches by what they can get out of these for themselves rather than as a group of people with whom they can be mutually committed. They claim that traditional churches encourage this attitude by having us sit in rows facing the front, which certainly does not facilitate relationships. Even holy communion services which are meant to be a family meal of God’s people, are experienced individually as people move to the front or remain in their pews to receive the bread and individual glasses of wine. [Of course, such examples of individualism can affect house churches as well, but it’s a little easier to combat in home meetings – personal comment].

Schaeffer contended (1970, pp.89-90) that it is no use *saying* we have community or love for each other if it does not get down into the tough stuff of life. It must, or else we are producing ugliness in the name of truth. If we fail, people will simply not listen – right doctrine and polity are not enough, we have to exhibit loving community.

He (1970, pp.130-131) then challenged people to *open their homes for community*.

“Don’t start a big programme. Don’t suddenly think you can add to your church budget and begin. Start personally, and start in your homes. I dare you in the name of Jesus Christ. Do what I am going to suggest. Begin by opening your home for community.”

Schaeffer challenged believers to invite guests from other cultural groups into their homes, drunks who might vomit on their carpets, etc. Of course, the Schaeffers practised what they preached and reached thousands of searching youth as they came to *L’Abri* in Switzerland.

Schaeffer concluded that churches should be *structured for community* (1970, pp.133ff).

This should include restructuring in areas like:

- The regular church meetings, e.g. the ‘Sunday morning at 10 am thing,’ the ‘prayer meeting on Wednesday night thing,’ etc.
- Jettisoning the many meaningless meetings... rather open up homes where people of all kinds can experience community.

He (1970, p.135) concluded that a revolution was coming and is here. If we don’t have the courage in Jesus Christ to take a chance of getting kicked out of our churches and being ostracized today, what are we going to do when the revolution comes in force? If we don’t have the courage to open up our homes and begin to bring these things into our churches... then there is no question of our having courage when the pressure comes.

“You keep talking about ‘community,’ but all we can think of is the neighbourhood where we live,” was the response Wilson (2006, pp.36-38), missionary in Papua New Guinea,

got when talking enthusiastically about the church as 'community' in his own home church in the USA . He adds that they neither caught his enthusiasm nor his meaning. For them 'community' meant brick and mortar, infrastructure, transport systems, schools, churches, shops, etc.

"No one seemed to understand that being a member of a church means living in close-knit and interdependent relationships." (Wilson explains their reaction as partly stemming from the emergence of 'the autonomous individual' during the Enlightenment, rapid urbanization, fragmentation of families and job mobility). Wilson concludes: "Urban-dwelling westerners have no paradigm by which to imagine the church as community."

He then describes his own journey on the mission field which, together with the writings of John Stott, finally brought him to an appreciation of true 'community.'

From a South African perspective, Hendriks (1995, p.30) has said,

"I prefer to speak of faith communities instead of church, because I want to emphasize personal relationships over and against formal relationships. Faith communities are the church at grass-roots level where people learn by helping each other and by sharing their gifts... Africa proves to us that faith is not merely an intellectual endeavour, but that it needs to be supplemented by feeling and emotion, fellowship and concern to be truly meaningful. The intellectual individualism of mainline Protestant denominations proves to be of little value in Africa."

3.2.

'Community' and the nature of God.

Frazer (2007, p.9) has stated that the one true God of the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6 is a relational God. We cannot fully understand one person of the Godhead without looking at them as a single community. We were made in the image of God, and therefore created to experience community as a necessary part of our whole existence. God's new community, following the Fall and the cross of Christ, is called 'the church.' Without the presence and practice of community in Christ there is no church. What you have

instead is a collection of individuals who happen to gather in the same room. There is a fundamental difference.

Frazer refers us to counsellor/psychologist, Crabb (cited in 2001, p.13), "Community matters... We were designed by our Trinitarian God (who is himself a group of three persons in profound relationship with each other) to live in relationship. Without it, we die... the future of the church depends on whether it develops true community."

3.3.

The relevance of house churches to the search for community.

Simson (1998, pp.79-80) is helpful here when he states that the house church is a way of living the Christian life communally in ordinary homes through supernatural power. It is the way redeemed people live locally... Since the redeemed no longer belong to themselves, they adopt a mainly communal, rather than purely private and individualistic, lifestyle. House churches emerge when truly converted people stop living their own life for their own ends, start living a community life according to the values of the kingdom of God, and start to share their life and their resources. Simson (1998, pp.79-80) quotes a messianic Jew who lived in community much of his life,

"Community life pulverizes your old ego in the power of the Spirit of God, and rescues you from just living a miserable private life, where after loving each other during a one-hour worship service a week we rush home to water our flowers, sit on our porch, eat our individual meals and wash our car. Our! We need to start to function as part of a fellowship of the redeemed. As the redeemed, we do not go home after a service, we are at home with each other."

3.4.

Some 'postscripts' on the fellowship crisis today and the rôle of house churches in this regard.

3.4.1.

Different paths to house church.

Some have turned to house churches because they were bearing too heavy an organizational church load or because they had considerable need. Others because they felt lost in an impersonal institution or disenchanted by its preoccupation with self-preservation. Others because they came across signposts in Scripture or in the traditions of their own denomination. Some because they sensed there must be more to church than what they were experiencing. Others were feeling hurt and rejected by institutional Christianity. "Some were searching for a deeper sense of *community* [my emphasis] or for a more effective base for mission. Others were struggling with the loss of a place to call *home* [my emphasis] or were looking for an alternative to a dysfunctional family. In some places political conditions were so intolerable, or their physical or social needs so great, that there was nowhere else to go. Whatever their starting point... all these people are moving in the same direction: *home* [my emphasis] - where the church began and where, at one level of its operation, it was always intended to be" (Banks, 2004, p.2).

3.4.2.

The Western, institutionalized, middle class can sometimes be 'a religion of the fortunate' (R. Niebuhr, cited in Hadaway & Wright & DuBose, 1987, p.103), irrelevant to lower classes and the masses. Too often churches erect insurmountable racial or cultural barriers that clothe the message in a narrowly defined white-Anglo perspective... *on the other hand*, the indigenous 'satellite unit' goes to where the people live. It is flexible, informal, mobile, and able to meet people on their own territory without the cultural obstacles that characterize most churches.

3.4.3.

Another practical concern today is the **lack of community experienced by pastors/ministers in churches**: they [and their families] are often 'burning out' in institutional churches by virtue of the lack of real fellowship and understanding. Banks (2004, pp.76-77,92) provides case-histories.^{62 63}

⁶² The writer can give many recent, personal examples known to him and his colleagues.

⁶³ David Prior (1985, pp.74-75) in the mid-1980's expressed his concern about pastors who were lonely and needy – where do *they* find community?

3.4.4.

Stott (1984, p.43) has made the interesting point that **community is helpful as an aid to our thinking about things** in a biblically mature way. He points to God's four gifts to this end:

- A mind with which to think...
- The Bible and its witness to Christ...
- The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, to open the Scriptures to us...
- **Christian community – this is the context in which we are to do our thinking.** Its heterogeneity is the best safeguard against blinkered vision. For the church has members of both sexes, and of all ages, temperaments, experiences and cultures. With such rich insights contributed to the interpretation of Scripture from such a diversity of backgrounds, it will be hard to maintain our prejudices [particularly so in a house church context – personal comment].

Hendriks (1995, p.30), who often 'faith communities' to small groups, has this to say:

“Modernistic Western Churches are challenged to re-frame themselves in nothing less than a new theological paradigm. In this regard it is advantageous to be in Africa where realities are sobering as well as challenging. The rational-intellectual dogmatic premises of Western individualistic theology and reasoning need to be tempered and readjusted. In Africa words have very little truth-value. Deeds are what count. The context of the world in which we live has changed. Our theology, theory and practice of ministry have to be drastically readjusted, or rather born again! This will happen only from within *faith communities* [my emphasis] where reading the Bible and reinterpreting the Christian message (story) under the guidance of the Holy Spirit will take place.”

4. THE FOURTH MAJOR REASON FOR THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE HOUSE CHURCH IN OUR TIME: POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION OF THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

4.1.

The resilience of house churches in witness, especially in times of opposition/persecution.

4.1.1.

It is stated that in **China**, for example, the house church networks' stress on personal evangelism by all Christians, meeting in homes and the establishment of grass-root small groups, have stood them in good stead for growth and development, even under the oppression of communism when many other denominations failed to adapt to and succumbed to the radically new social conditions (Lambert, 1994, p.14).

Lambert (1994, pp.81-82,174) comments on the persecution and imprisonment of young house church preachers in Henan Province (including a 14-year old girl who was beaten senseless on an occasion) – far from dampening the local Christians' enthusiasm, this persecution helped to spread the gospel even further. Bible training had to take place in homes and caves under great hardship, those imprisoned endured horrific beatings and mental torture, etc.

Jiasheng Shen (1999, pp.1-2), writing about 'The Three Warfronts of Mainland Chinese House Churches,' names the three most threatening enemies to the church in China: Persecution by counterfeit Christians blurring the line between church and state (infiltration of house churches by Communist party members which have greatly harmed house churches); oppression by evil spirits and heresies (according to the author, heresies such as that of extreme Charismatics and the 'Eastern Flash of Lightning' are not representative of the main stream of house churches); obsession with wealth under the 'open door policy' and exposure to Western cultures and economies (Shen relates how an elderly house church worker seriously asked him to remind overseas Christians not to send more money or material resources to Mainland China for the latter reasons).

Despite all these assaults on church life largely in the house church format, and perhaps because of them, God's kingdom in China grows unabated.⁶⁴

4.2.

The reality of world-systems opposed to the work of the kingdom of God.

Wagner (2004, pp.17-18,27ff,184ff) talks much about a spiritual resistance to change for the good which is more than natural or rational and which can only be explained in terms of the demonic world. For years he has taught the reality of world-systems opposed to the work of the kingdom of God. He speaks of a '**corporate spirit of religion**' which fights at all costs to preserve the church status quo, refuses to exchange 'old wine skins' of thinking and structure at all costs – often because there is just too much to lose in terms of denominational and personal power and controls. He is adamant that God will not pour new wine into old wineskins, i.e. worn-out structures (he points to the legalism of the Pharisees and their opposition to Jesus and His ministry).

Wagner is critical about 'the rise of democratic church government' and 'the doctrine of democratic church government' in the American church (often based on politics and cultural issues rather than the Bible), including traditional as well as Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations. He speaks of a 'second apostolic age' where church leaders look beyond enlarging their congregations (although this remains important), i.e. to co-operate and network across denominational affiliations for the good of cities and nations, penetrating all levels of society with the values and principles of the kingdom of God. In this sense, there are those who perceive a **persecution of a kind from *within the church***, which leads them to want to break out to what they feel is a more biblical form of church and church structure. Wagner's arguments (2004, pp.45ff,52ff) are somewhat controversial, but need some consideration and healthy evaluation [the writer, after a lifetime of denominational ministry, would largely agree with Wagner when he says that it is sometimes impossible to radically change denominational thinking and structures from *within* that denomination, even on the basis of consistent scriptural argument. Wagner cites the case of John Wesley and traditional Anglicanism in his day].

⁶⁴ Many heartbreaking but powerful books, like Danyun's *Life Among Thorns* (1991) and Paul Hattaway's *The Heavenly Man* (2002), graphically document the heroic growth of the house church movement and the witness of its leaders and members under the oppression of atheistic communism in China.

CHAPTER III HOUSE CHURCHES, THE BEST REFLECTION OF
THE BIBLICAL MATERIAL RELATING TO THE CHURCH

1. TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH AND CHURCH STRUCTURE....
2. A BIBLICAL-TOPICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHURCH....
3. A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE CHURCH...
4. A BIBLICAL-EXEGETICAL BASIS FOR THE CHURCH: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE BOOK OF ACTS...
5. WHAT ROLE DID THE JEWISH SYNAGOGUE AND ITS WORSHIP PLAY IN THE LIFE OF THE HOUSE CHURCHES?
- 6 KINGDOM AND CULTURE ...
7. WHAT WOULD A RENEWED CHURCH LOOK LIKE TODAY?
8. TOWARD AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF HOUSE CHURCH...

**1. TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH AND CHURCH
STRUCTURE**

1.1.

Ecclesiology – do we need a fresh perspective?

According to Christensen (1986, pp.5-7), writing on ‘Ecclesiology in Theology,’ the creation mandate in theology⁶⁵ necessitates a radical refocusing of emphasis and

⁶⁵ By ‘creation mandate’ Christensen means building on the premise that the mission mandate (Gen. 12:1-3; Mt. 28:18-20) comes out of the creation mandate (Gen. 1 and 2). In putting feet to the church’s global vision, special care must be taken not to destroy the direction in which creation points: Christ came not to

method. He quotes Kinsler (1986, p.6) as saying that what is needed is “**a new ecclesiology in which the people and their local leaders are in fact the primary base of ministry.**” He quotes Kirk (1986, p.7), “Experience seems to demonstrate that the full ministry of Christ’s body (often called ‘every-member-ministry’) will never flourish until the clerical stranglehold on local churches is removed.”

1.2.

‘A church of the people.’

Moltmann (1978, pp.83ff) pointed out that ‘God’s people’ must participate in the discipline of theological reflection, which would include the discipline of ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is and must always be Christological – dialogue about the cross drives us to dialogue under the cross, the nearer we draw to Christ the nearer we draw to each other in true community, the essence of the church.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, says Moltmann (1978, pp.95ff), theology too often separates itself from the people, i.e. God’s people in His church. Thus we are dealing with ‘a church for the people but not of the people,’ with the rank and file not being made to feel like responsible subjects in their churches. Yet the common people loved Jesus and came to hear Him and found happiness in His presence – by contrast the Pharisees and the Scribes were hated by the people and that is why they (the Pharisees and Scribes) had to deal with Jesus gingerly, lest the people rise up against them (Mt. 7:31,48ff).

Where is the true church then? Where Christ is! Before we arrive with all our church programs, Moltmann (1978, pp.103,105) suggests we discover Christ in the people.⁶⁷

All this, to the mind of the writer, calls us back to the essential root-principles of the NT (e.g. the priesthood of all believers, to which these days we often pay only lip-service). If ever there was an anointed and effective ‘lay-movement’ (not without its conflicts and challenges, as already pointed out), it was the first century church.

destroy the law but to fulfil it (Mt. 5:17); the focus of creation is on the *family*; the gospel creates *Christian families*; the church’s foundational leadership will come from *Christian homes*; lived-out Christianity is shown best by the basic unit of society viz. *the home*; etc.

⁶⁶ Moltmann (1978, pp.88-89) quotes the example of prisoners-of-war in a post World War II POW camp in Germany, who practised the priesthood of all believers – they made no distinction between clergy and laity, different denominations, etc. He cites the similar case of prisons in contemporary Chile and Korea.

1.3.

Theological and socio-physical ramifications of NT household churches.

1.3.1.

”Since all the churches of the New Testament (Birkey, 1991, p.1) were communities small enough to meet in someone’s home, certain theological and sociological ramifications arise out of this stark reality. From this data we can observe a ‘missionary model’ which has relevance for contemporary mission... Examples of effective church decentralization in the Two Thirds World further support this thesis.”

Birkey points out how that (now seventy years ago) the respected Filson (cited in Birkey, 1991, p.1) called attention to **the failure of contemporary scholarship to grapple with the household concept of NT times**. In his seminal article, ‘The Significance of the Early House Churches’ he affirmed that the New Testament church would be better understood if more attention were paid to the *actual physical conditions* [my emphasis] under which the first Christians met and lived. In particular, the importance and function of house church should be carefully considered.

Birkey (1991, p.1) added

“While the past decades have witnessed a resurgent interest in and development of house churches scattered across the world, the church at large remains unenlightened regarding contemporary house churches as well as *early church structure* [my emphasis], highlighting an urgent need for an evangelical house-church theology... socio-physical conditions of the New Testament church contain theological implications that may inform renewal and mission strategies more thoroughly than we are usually willing to affirm.”

1.3.2.

Gehring (2004, pp.257-258), from a house church and a NT church order perspective, shows from the Ephesian and Colossian letters that *ekklesia* is used largely with reference to the church universal, and yet equally describes local churches and in

particular house churches. More particularly, his research on the NT house church reveals that household structures had a critical impact on church order (2004, p.259). Thus for example he cites Dunn (cited in 2004, p.260), “the model of the well-run household provided a precedent for the well-run church.” Gehring (2004, p.260-263) argues for *oikos* order as church order. From the central ecclesiological text of the pastoral epistles, viz. I Timothy 3:15, we can see a clear ecclesiological image of the church as the *oikos* church.

“The understanding of the church here (2004, p.261) goes beyond the metaphorical: the church is characterized, even in its concrete organizational structures, by the perception of itself as a household, with ‘household’ understood in terms of the ancient *oikos*. For the Pastorals, the church really is the household or the family of God. Viewed in this way, ‘household or family of God’ becomes the model for responsible behaviour as well as church order and leadership structures, and thus the central, all-guiding image for the self understanding of the church.”

Much supports this perspective, according to Gehring (2004, pp.262-263), e.g. the numerous terminological references to parallels between house and church. In addition, the system of order in the church is in alignment with the ancient *oikos* regarding the formation of member groups, e.g. the rules for men/women, elderly/youth, masters/slaves, widows, etc. The designation of the church as *oikos Theou* is therefore to be understood quite literally. The image of the house is fused with the notion of *familia Dei*. If one understands the church as the house of God, then it logically follows that a *pater familias*, God Himself, would be at its head. God is called the *despotes* (head of the household, 2 Tim. 2:21). He has appointed a local family leader (*episkopos*, overseer) as an *oikonomos* (house administrator or manager). This overseer carries out the function of the householder in the church of God (*ekklesia Theou*). An analogy can be made between the function of the householder and the church office holder.

The emergence of such *oikos* language in the pastorals is best explained by assuming a house church setting, in which private domestic houses served as gathering places for the church.

1.4.

The church is about simplicity. [in the opinion of the writer, a basic NT church *principle*, seldom carried through to the contemporary church]

1.4.1.

Newbigin (1964, pp.72ff), writing about the Church as 'body of Christ,' warned (in the 1960's) about creeping institutionalism – he said that we can all recall movements of fresh vitality in the Church, breakthrough and a revolt against the hardened structure of the older body and liberty from outward forms and institutions, only to see how rapidly they develop their own forms, their own structures of thought, of language and of organisation. We need to remember, when it comes to church structure, that (1964, p.73)

“In the New Testament that structure is expressed in very **simple** terms – continuance in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers. Even our perversions and caricatures of that structure, even the appalling modern development of church bureaucracy which perhaps most afflicts the Churches which have most tried to deny that church order belongs to the substance of the Christian religion, all bear witness to the fact that being in Christ means being incorporated in a visible society which is – in principle – undivided and continuous, binding all men and all generations in the one body of Christ, from His coming until His coming again.”

Furthermore (1964, p.74), church history compels us to confess that when something else has been put in the place of this structure, something very important has been lost... The divine society into which Jesus admitted men “was more than a school of correct theology. It was a personal fellowship of those who believed in Him, who had yet many things to learn which they would only learn slowly and stumblingly, but who could be trusted to be His ambassadors to the world and the foundation stones of His Church because He abode in Him.”

1.4.2.

Similarly Watson (1978, pp.17-19) saw the church in very simple terms, viz. the embodiment of the Gospel, community, relationships and **simplicity**. This is how the church was designed to be. To quote Phillips (cited in Watson, 1978, p.61) (in his preface to his paraphrase of Acts),

“Perhaps because of their very *simplicity* [my italics], perhaps because of their readiness to believe, to obey, to give, to suffer, and if need be to die, the Spirit of God found what he must always be seeking – a fellowship of men and women so united in love and faith that he can work in them and through them with the minimum of let and hindrance.”

1.4.3.

McClung (2008, p.iv) declares his faith in the orthodoxy of a radical community of Jesus followers who seek to alleviate injustice and share the Father’s love with those who have never heard that He cares. He declares his belief that the church of Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. Jesus Himself chose the church to be His on-going, incarnate presence in the world. God is in the business of transforming the world one life, one family and one community at a time. The church needs to dream big and build small, one new *ecclesia* of believers at a time. McClung (2004, p.48) is presently pioneering a movement of ‘**simple church**’ [house church] communities in Cape Town, SA. He dreams about a network of culturally relevant communities that impact on every aspect of people’s lives, that changes people’s lives and transforms the communities around them. The purpose is that ultimately hundreds of holistic church planters will be sent to the nations (in which several hundred million followers of Jesus live – these countries are closed to Christianity, allowing no church buildings, no pastors and no youth activities) (2008, p.48).

McClung affirms (2008, p.xv) five foundational core beliefs to guide us:

- **simple church**; [McClung equates simple church and house church]
- courageous leadership;
- focused obedience;

- apostolic passion;
- making disciples.

Basic to his definition of church structure is *simplicity* - informal and relational networks of house churches and other incarnational churches (fleshing out Christ in this world), church as 'family' (Eph. 3:15), etc. Authority structures are relational rather than hierarchical, after the pattern of Acts, which is not just 'good history' but a kind of 'model' to give us a concrete example to follow. Above all the church is 'a revelation of the glory of God,' according to Ephesians 3:10-11.

1.5.

The shortcomings of the Reformation with regard to ecclesiology.

It is evident that the Reformation largely failed to touch ecclesiology, certainly at grassroots level. Protestant ecclesiology, generally, is often based more on tradition than on Scripture.

H.R. Niebuhr (cited in Snyder, 1996, p.49) writes as follows, "The failure of the Reformation to meet the religious needs of the peasants and other disenfranchised groups is a chapter writ large in history. With all its native religious fervour it remained the religion of the middle class and the nobility."

Where the reformers failed, the Anabaptists were more determined and successful. [The historian, Bainton (cited in Snyder, 1996, p.50), supports this point: "Much more drastically than their contemporaries (the Anabaptists) searched the Scriptures in order to recover the pattern of the early church"].

Watson (1978, pp.252-254), writing on the reshaping of church structures, pointed out that while the Reformation was a time when the heart of the gospel was rediscovered, there was sadly **a failure to come to grips with the doctrine of the church itself**. While it is true that the Reformers discussed at length what it was that constituted any true church of Jesus Christ, their primary concern was the gospel and justification by

faith. **Considerations concerning the *structure* of the church did not seem to be relevant.** As a result, most Protestant denominations have been just as ‘priest-ridden’ [Watson’s term] as the Roman Catholic church – it is the vicar, the minister or the pastor who has usually dominated the whole proceedings. Watson (1978, p.253) in this connection cites Hart, “Even though the leaders of the Protestant Reformation sincerely intended to break with the traditional Roman Catholic conception of the church, nevertheless the tradition arising from the Reformation did not succeed in making that break.”⁶⁸

1.6.

The need for biblical renewal of church structure as *community*.

Snyder (2004, pp.211ff) gives seven steps toward renewal of the church as ‘the *community*’:

- Study carefully the biblical nature of the church;
- Evaluate the quality of the community life of the church;
- Think through what the Bible teaches about the gifts of the Spirit;
- Work consciously and continuously to transcend the clergy-laity dichotomy in both thought and speech;
- Consider birthing new congregations from the existing local church;
- Form small-group fellowships as mission or special ministry groups [in the writer’s opinion, Snyder does not go far enough – what about small-group fellowships being recognized as ‘full-blown’ churches, as in Acts and the Epistles?];
- Identify segments of the surrounding population especially open to the gospel where new churches could be planted.⁶⁹

In summary of Snyder (2004, pp.79ff,84ff), the church is *not* essentially an institution, though just like a human family, there is an institutional side to it. He quotes Volf (cited in Snyder,

⁶⁸ This point is endorsed by Bloesch, Packer and others (Snyder, 2004, p.12).

⁶⁹ For another endorsement of the church as community, see J.D Wilson (Jan. 2006), “Unity in Community: The Vision of the Church in Ephesians.” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 42, p.41.

2004, pp.80-81), “The question is not whether the church is an institution, but rather *what kind* of institution it is.”

Some institutionalization of the church is already evident in the NT – regular meetings in homes, some patterns of leadership, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, etc. However (according to Snyder, 2004, p.80), these institutional elements were highly functional in the early church. No officially structured, formalized organizations in the sense of the present-day denominations or societies were to be found. Institutionalization of this more rigid, hierarchical and organizational type grew up only in the second and third centuries, in part as a reaction to the perceived charismatic excesses of the Montanists. The church will inevitably manifest some institutional patterns, but no institution can ever be the church.

“The church (2004, p.81) can never be essentially an institution, even though it will necessarily be institutional in some aspects of its life.”

Rather, the church is essentially a ‘messianic community,’ i.e. built on/centred in/inspired by ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’ (Mt. 16:16-18) – if Jesus Christ spent more time preparing a community of disciples than proclaiming the good news [which He did], then the church must also recognize the importance of community for proclamation. This priority of community is important both for each believer and for the church’s witness (2004, p.90). Spiritual growth occurs best in a caring community (Eph. 4:15-16) – Barth (cited in Snyder, 2004, p.91) rightly pointed out that when the NT speaks of up-building, it “speaks always of the up-building of the community. I can identify myself only as I edify the community.”

The early church affirmation ‘Jesus is Lord’ (Acts 2; Philippians 2) must be the cry of the church today (2004, p.114),

“the church is truly the agent of God’s cosmic plan only as it is truly the community of God’s people. As an ecclesiastical institution, the church can show little, if anything, of the kingdom. But as the messianic community functioning as a charismatic body, it can and does reveal the true nature of the kingdom as it hastens its coming.”

1.7.

Toward a 'theology of church structure.'

Thinking specifically of ecclesiology and the house church, Hadaway and Wright and DuBose (1987, pp.56-62) make an important contribution on 'the theology of church structure.' They begin by saying there is **a direct line between the *nature, function and structure*** of a thing. We can expect the church to assume certain functions growing out of its nature, and we can expect these functions to be translated into structures as the church takes root and grows in its cultural, social, economic and political context. Thus the nature of the church may be understood in two ways (1987, p.56):

- (a) through direct (biblical) *statements* on the church;
- (b) through (biblical) *descriptions* of the church.

The NT contains a number of figures of speech to describe the nature and function of the church, e.g. as 'God's household' (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 2:19); 'household of faith' (Gal. 6:10); God's 'flock' (Acts 20:28); 'body of Christ' (1 Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 1:22-23); instrument of God's glory (Eph. 3:21); etc. When we consider Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18-19, Luke 24:46-49 and Acts 1:8 we are able to see clearly that the ultimate implication of the instrumental nature of the church is that **mission** [my emphasis] is its very nature and function (1987, p.58).

The church in all of its manifestations reflects in function the very qualities presented ideologically in the teachings of Jesus, Paul and others in the NT.

See for example the functions of the church in the Book of Acts (1987, p.59):

- Attention to the apostles' teaching;
- Fellowship (unity);
- Breaking of bread in the homes;
- Prayers;
- Praise to God;
- Material sharing;
- Worship;

- Community witness (favour with all the people);
- Evangelism (daily adding to the church).

Throughout the Book of Acts these *functions* continue as the witness spreads over the Mediterranean world. As function is translated into *structure*, the form which emerges is **inherently related to the nature of the church**. “Therefore a theology of church structure is only an expression of the theology of the church in keeping with the context of the day” (1987, p.61).

Thus we see the church passing through different cultural phases viz. Jewish culture, Gentile culture, etc. In terms of social context, the early church was largely an urban church – amongst other things it assumed the form of small-group communication, reflecting the primary groups which always constitute the urban mosaic. Consequently in terms of function and ultimately in terms of structure, the NT account reflects clearly how the church was able to transcend its cultural, social, economic and political context; how it was conditioned by that context; even how it was enhanced by it. Moreover, it was in the **house church** that we are best able to see this structural reflection of the nature and function of the church in relationship to its environment (1987, p.62). Even though the house church reflected aspects of the cultural, social, economic and political context of the day, *the essential nature of the church was not determined by it* – furthermore, the very context of the house church enhanced the function of the church (1987, p.63). What a wonderful expression the house church was of the church as God’s household and God’s family. The liturgical function of the early church was best expressed in the house church. The diakonic function was integral to the early house church (1987, p.65). Even though the missional nature of the early church compelled it to public witness outside the homes as an augmentation to the evangelism that happened there, it was the common life of the house church centred in its teaching, fellowship and worship which provided the theological and spiritual basis for that witness. The church was the people – first, last and always. As Filson put it (cited in Hadaway & Wright & DuBose, 1987, p.68), the development, for example, of church polity and leadership can never be understood without reference to the house churches.

Hadaway and Wright and Dubose (1987, p.69) make it clear that there is a continuity between the apostolic church and the church which followed this era, up until the time of *Constantine* – through the house church and the kind of spiritual life it fostered. For generations after the apostles, the church continued its spontaneous lay witness (people of God) in the cities and along the great trade routes of the empire. **Sadly, with the intervention of Constantine, ideological changes were taking place which were altering the NT theology of the church** [my emphasis]. The plurality and equality of leadership was giving way to a hierarchical arrangement with the bishop becoming the central figure followed by the presbyters (who later became priests) and deacons. These bishops who were at first pastors, assumed a role of authority as well as leadership. Other aspects of theological adaptation came (1987, p.70) came with a more sacramental understanding of baptism and the eucharist – this was one of the forerunners of the clergy-laity divide. Most negatively, **with Constantine, came the most definitive change for the nature, function and structure of the church** (1987, p.70) – **the shift from house church to 'basilica'** (lit. 'royal palace'), usually an oblong hall with colonnade and apse used for lawcourt and assemblies, now also used for Christian meetings and services. The apse (semicircular or polygonal recess, arched or dome-roofed) was now the domain of the official clergy. In the centre of this area was a throne-like chair in which the bishop sat. The table for the Lord's Supper was in front of the apse, in the area which later became known as the altar. The nave (body of church building from West door to chancel, usually separated by pillars from aisles), in the centre of the basilica, was occupied by the 'lower' clergy and the choir. The people, the 'spectator- worshippers' were relegated to the side aisles, separated by gender. The catechumens, i.e. those under instruction for church membership, and the penitents, i.e. those under church discipline, were restricted to the porch area near the outer area of the nave.⁷⁰ *This brought a dramatic change in ecclesiology.* For example, the basilica facilitated the division between clergy and laity, worship changed from being the united celebration of the people to a clergy-performed ritual with the laity as spectators. It was a fundamental and qualitative departure which has persisted to this day with many

⁷⁰ For a full description of the basilica together with illustrations and photographs, see T. Dowley, *Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity* (1977, pp.150-152) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

negative consequences for the church of Jesus Christ. Thus this building-centred structure of the church has dominated institutional church life ever since.

“It has been in the great renewal groups that an effort to recover both the nature and function of the church in terms of structure has occurred. Whether it has been the Waldensians before the Reformation, the Anabaptists during the Reformation, or the Brethren groups after the Reformation, there has been a striking similarity – the recovery of the priesthood of all believers, the blurring of lines between the clergy and the laity, an emphasis on the unity and oneness of all the people of God, and the recovery of the house church” (1987, p.72).

Sadly we have inherited Constantine’s professionalization/institutionalisation of the church through centuries of church history. Even the Holiness and Pentecostal denominations have fallen into the same pattern. Suffice it to say (1987, p.78), what is needed today is that which translates the church most authentically in terms of both the essential nature of the church and the indigenous nature of the social context in which the church has been planted. Because the house church biblically and historically has been the structure through which this has happened in a vital way, and because it gives evidence of being the structure through which it is happening today, we must be prayerfully open to this prospect as we plan for God’s work in the future, both locally and beyond (1987, p.78).

2. A BIBLICAL-TOPICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHURCH: ISSUES

TOUCHING THE CHURCH, TRADITIONAL AND HOUSE CHURCH ⁷¹

2.1.

The church local and universal.

We commonly speak about the *visible church* and the *invisible church*, underlining the painful contrast between what the church is called to be (holy, the people of God, etc)

⁷¹ The field of ecclesiology is so wide, therefore we are touching here only on some of the more important issues as raised in the writer’s mind and that of my Supervisor.

and what it is in reality (unholy, divided, etc). Traditionally it has also been seen this way: the *mystical view* and the *institutional view* of the church.

Grudem (1994, pp.855-856), writing in connection with 'the church invisible, yet visible,' gives the following definitions:

- a) *The invisible church is the church as God sees it.* Both Luther and Calvin were eager to affirm this invisible aspect of the church over against the Roman Catholic teaching that the church was the one visible organization that had descended from the apostles in an unbroken line of succession (through the bishops of the church).⁷² The Roman Catholic church had argued (and still does) that only in the visible organization of the Roman Church can we find the one true church, the only true church (1994, p.855). Calvin argued that because the Roman Catholics had departed from the true preaching of the gospel, their visible organization was not the true church.
- b) *The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it.* In this sense the visible church includes all who profess faith in Christ and give evidence of that faith in their lives (1994, p.856).

Grudem (1994, p.857) also writes on the church 'local and universal.' In the NT the word 'church' may be applied to a group of believers *at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal church.* A 'house church' is called a 'church' in Romans 16:5 (*'greet also **the church in their house***'), 1 Cor. 16:19 (*'Aquila and Prisca, together with **the church in their house**, send you hearty greetings in the Lord'*) [my emphases]. The church in an entire city is called 'a church' (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1)⁷³ - the same thing applies to the church in a particular region, e.g. the church in Judea, Galilee and Samaria (Acts 9:31), indeed it applies also to the church throughout the entire world (Eph. 5:25).⁷⁴

⁷² For Calvin's view on 'apostolic succession,' see Grudem (1994, p.856).

⁷³ In this dissertation we argue for 'networks of house churches' in the different cities, planted by Paul and others.

⁷⁴ When Grudem (1994, pp.864-866) writes on the 'marks' of a true church (according to Luther and Calvin), he includes (a) the Word of God being purely preached and heard; (b) the sacraments being

Snyder (1996, pp.162-163) challenges the traditional 'mystical' and 'institutional' view of the 'church local and universal.' He insists that both these views, i.e. the mystical and institutional, **do not take culture seriously**. In the institutional view, the church becomes so wedded to its particular culture that the culturally determined nature of much of its life and structure is overlooked. In the mystical view, the church floats nebulously above culture and never gets tangled in the limiting dimensions of space, time and history. In both cases it is really culture that becomes 'invisible.' Says Snyder (1996, pp.164ff), to understand the church biblically we must move beyond the traditional visible-invisible model and move back to the prior and more fundamental biblical view which he defines as follows:

- a) The Bible sees the church in cosmic-historical perspective, the church being placed at the very centre of God's cosmic purpose (Eph. 1:9-10, 20-23; 3:10; 6:12).
- b) The Bible sees the church in charismatic rather than institutional terms. According to the NT, the church is a charismatic organism rather than an institutional organization. Churches that structure themselves charismatically are largely prepared for the future, whereas churches which are encased in rigid, bureaucratic, institutional structures soon find themselves in culturally bound forms fast becoming obsolete.
- c) The Bible sees the church as the community of God's people. The essential biblical pictures of body, household, etc. help us here. The church is essentially the community of God's people. People and community are two poles which together make up the biblical reality of the church – on the one hand the church is the people of God (1 Pet. 2:9), emphasizing the church's *universality*; on the other hand the church is a *koinonia*, emphasizing its informal nature and interaction at *local church level*.

faithfully administered. He then adds the following, "Someone may stand on a street corner with a small crowd and have true preaching and hearing of the Word, but the people there would not be a church. Even a neighborhood Bible study in a home can have the true teaching and hearing of the Word without becoming a church. But if a local Bible study began baptizing its own new converts and regularly participating in the Lord's Supper [as do house churches – personal comment], these things would signify *an intention to function as a church*, and it would be difficult to say why it should not be considered a church in itself."

[The writer feels that Snyder's perspective strengthens the case for house church, as it is a far simpler and more flexible instrument for demonstrating the above-mentioned biblical principles].

Bonhoeffer, on the church local and universal, put the matter like this (1954, pp.18ff):
Between the death of Christ and the Last Day it is only by a gracious invitation of the last things that Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians.

“It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing.”

Bonhoeffer (1954, pp.26ff) warns against those 'dreamers' who fashion a visionary ideal of community that demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself... because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because He has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ, long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life not as demanders but as recipients. We thank God for giving us brothers and sisters who live by His call, by His forgiveness and His promise. “Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate” (1954, p.30).

To summarise Bonhoeffer's view here (1963, p.98), “**The local church is the concrete form of the whole church of God** [my emphasis] (1 Cor. 1:2). But it is also itself the church of God. It is 'the form in which the whole church appears in one place.' The whole church is real only in the local church.”

Richardson (2007, pp.106-108), in his evaluation of Bonhoeffer for our time [including contemporary SA], asks “Which one of the thousands of Christian denominations would Bonhoeffer see as the true church?”

Bonhoeffer never suggests that one particular denomination is the true church, for he speaks of the presence of Christ rather than of any particular ecclesiastical institution. Yet there is no doubt that Bonhoeffer saw the impulses that inspired the ecumenical movement in his day as both compatible with and highly useful to the Confessing Church in the early to mid-1930's. Richardson adds that Bonhoeffer would have had a serious and challenging word to South African Christians about the fragmentation of the Christian presence into so many denominations. He would challenge the South African churches in their joint social, economic and political witness to Christ in the post-apartheid era. Combined action alone, however, would not satisfy him.

Barth, writing on the **church 'invisible'** (1960, p.142), insisted that it is **best not to use this term of the church** [my emphasis], for

“we are all inclined to slip away with that in the direction of a *civitas platonica* or some sort of 'Cloud-cuckooland,' in which the Christians are united inwardly and invisibly, while the visible church is devalued... The first congregation was a visible group, which caused a visible uproar. If the Church has not this visibility, then it is not the Church.”

The NT Church, according to Barth (1960, p.143), consisted of visible congregations, e.g. the congregation of Jerusalem, Rome, etc, which were fraught with problems – however the NT never presents the Church apart from these problems. The person who doesn't believe that in this congregation of his, including those men and women, old wives and children, Christ's congregation exists, does not believe at all in the existence of the Church (1960, p.143) – in fact (1960, p.143), “In faith I attest that the concrete congregation to which I belong and for the life of which I am responsible, is appointed to the task of making in this place, in this form, the one, holy, universal Church visible.”

Newbigin (1964, pp.52-57) traces the matter of the church visible and invisible to an over-intellectualisation of the doctrine of the church by the Reformers, to whom 'correct doctrine' was everything. This led to the virtual disappearance of the church as a visible unity. One of the sad results was the Protestant movement being quite content to see

the church of Jesus Christ splitting up into hundreds of separate sects. The NT assumes that (1964, p.56) there is a real people of God in the world, a real spiritual society, a real body of Christ actually present in the world, a place where the light of God really shines and the life of God really pulses, and that it makes the most awful and ultimate difference conceivable whether you are inside or outside of that place... “This divine-human fellowship is a real visible community having its place in history, even though the secret of its life is invisible and lies beyond world history.”

It is surely a fact of inexhaustible significance that what our Lord left behind Him was not a creed, nor a system of thought, nor a rule of life, but a visible community – Newbigin (1994, p.27) stated that Protestants cannot too often reflect on that fact.

2.2.

In conclusion, it seems that the views expressed by the aforementioned are critical for the church in the 21st century, including new shapes of church, ‘simple church’ and house church as defined. It seems to the writer that for the non-institutional church, the task of unity is/could be somewhat ‘easier,’ though impossible apart from Christ and being ‘in Him.’

Finally, the house church movement is non-denominational and strongly ‘kingdom-focussed,’ therefore contributing to inter-church partnership in pursuit of Christ’s kingdom on earth.

3. A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE CHURCH.

3.1.

The importance of an ‘incarnational ecclesiology,’ with the church reflecting the action of God via ‘incarnational’ being, living and serving.

Newbigin (1964, pp.51,61-62) has reminded us that what Christ left behind was a fellowship, to which He entrusted the task of being His representative to the world. As the Father had sent Him, so He was sending His followers into the world. They were to be His representatives, His plenipotentiaries. He endowed them with His own Spirit to be

His witnesses. This was Christ's explicit provision for the extension of His saving power to the whole world. In answer to the question 'How is Jesus present to us today?' the answer must be: 'He is present in His people, His apostolic fellowship.' If His purpose had been to provide for all succeeding generations of mankind a revelation of God which could be embodied in a series of verbal statements of absolute inerrancy, or an infallible code of conduct, He could have left a written deposit as Mahomet is said to have done. But it is precisely what He did not do. He chose twelve men that they might be with Him and that He might send them forth. Being with Him they received, not so much a formal course of instruction in divine truth as an introduction into the intimacy of His Spirit... This sense of the unity, one may almost say identity, of Jesus and His apostles, and indeed all who believe on Him through this word, is expressed with great fullness on the night of His passion. Here the Lord says that He has given to them the glory which He had with the Father, in order that they may be one in the same unity with which the Father and the Son are one, and that by this perfect unity the world may know that the Father has sent Him (Jn. 17).

Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.31ff) remind us of the fundamentality of the *incarnation of Christ* to: the salvation of the church; our individual faith; the church itself; to her mission. Thus we are called to identify ourselves with our world, without destroying culture and without compromising the good news. This calls for a real and abiding presence among people, learning to live with a 'sending impulse' rather than an 'extractional' one (2003, pp.40ff). The authors (2003, p.47) point out that Western churches are particularly prone to the latter. Instead of engaging in 'out-reach' we become guilty of 'in-drag,' with even the 'cells' of cell churches pressured to get people into the cell and thus 'into church.' A church in *incarnational* mode, however, sees the world as intersecting lines/networks of relationships. It sees people not so much as Christians and non-Christians but in terms of distance from the centre, which is Christ. For it is true that Christian conversion, while involving a critical passing from 'death to life,' is more of a process than a once-off crisis (implied in the word 'conversion' is some thought of process) (1 Jn. 5:11-15). Here evangelism becomes largely organic, with proclamation of the gospel side-by-side with incarnational/missional living and infiltration

of society (2003, p.53). The incarnational church pursues the multiplication (ne church planting another, which plants another – of which one can give concrete examples as for example Garrison does in his ‘Church Planting Movements’ (1999) of mobile, transferable, contextual ‘incarnational communities’ who ‘make disciples’ of all nations (2003, pp.65,145).

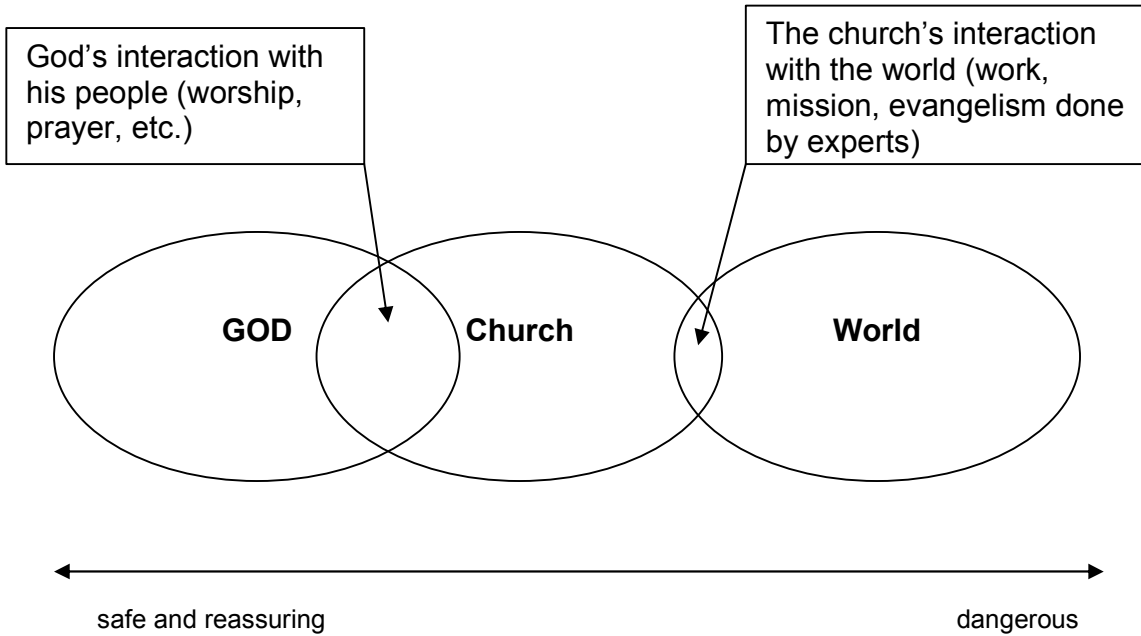
Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.74-75) give an example of the use of ‘home’ and ‘pub’ in Hobart, Tasmania: in this model believers rent homes within walking distance of pubs which become their platform for meeting with and engaging the community, and if needs are expressed, interested folk are invited to come home with them where they continue the conversation (other incarnational methods used include CD launches, live music, art exhibitions, etc. in the local community). This exemplified illustrates graphically the *advantages of the house church* over traditional churches in incarnating Christ in the community.

If we see the church incarnationally, we recognize that we ourselves are the message. Kierkegaard (cited in Frost & Hirsch, 2003, pp.154ff) spoke of ‘existence communication’ and reminded us that Christianity is not first of all a doctrine but an ‘existence communication.’ As Buber (cited in Frost & Hirsch, 2003, p.156) put it, “We are the teaching.”

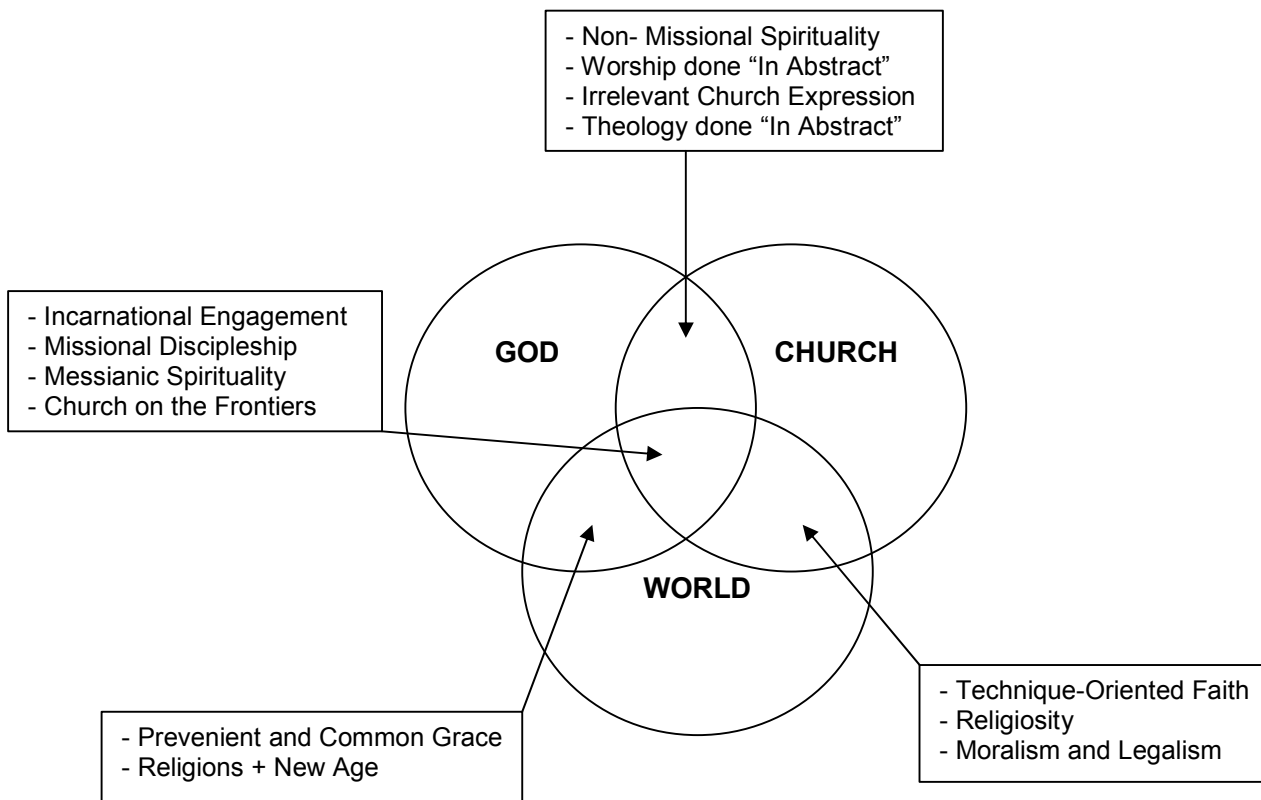
The authors (2003, pp.157-158) provide some fascinating diagrams of the church in ‘dualistic/Christendom mode’ and by contrast ‘missional/incarnational mode’:

(pto)

DUALISTIC/CHRISTENDOM MODE



MISSIONAL/INCARNATIONAL MODE



Missional-Incarnational-Messianic-Apostolic Mode

In the incarnational/missional mode, worship is always done in the context of mission, and must be culturally relevant. Our evangelism and social action is communal, we join with God in redeeming the world (He's already there), and our spirituality is of the 'all-of-life variety.' Those engaged in this approach around the world begin to experience the wonder of realizing that 'church' is not something excluded from the rest of life, least of all the home and the neighbourhood.

3.2.

The theology of family and the church as 'family.'

3.2.1.

Anderson and Guernsey (1985, p.vii) write that

“Every human person is in some way connected to another person or persons. This is a necessary social reality as well as a theological truth, for being connected means being human, and being human means being part of a *family*. If the church is in the people business, which it ought to be, it is logical that the church needs a 'theology of family' as well as recognizing her calling to live and grow as 'family of God.'”

It is interesting to consider the *approach of Jesus* (1985, pp.139ff). Was Jesus disloyal to the hallowed institution of family? The answer is that he did not polarize discipleship and family but spoke for the transformation of family – the only thing Jesus criticized was people's 'captivity to family relationships' no less than captivity to material possessions, fame, etc.⁷⁵ In fact Jesus enhances family and relationships by exorcising the destructive and demonic disorder that threatens it.

⁷⁵ In reading devotionally through the Gospel according to Luke, it became obvious to me that at times even Jesus' own family did not have a proper kingdom perspective (did they demonstrate a certain possessiveness and scepticism re Jesus?), and were something of a frustration to Him and the fulfilment of His purposes: see Luke 8:19-21 and compare John 7:1-9. (All this despite the fact that He had delayed His messianic ministry to the age of thirty, so that His siblings were reasonably independent and His mother not left with burdens too heavy to bear (Joseph probably having died earlier on). This perspective is confirmed by Leon Morris in his commentary on 'Luke' p.153-154 (1974) (London: IVP) as well as by E.M. Blaiklock (1966. pp.29-30) in his commentary on 'St. Luke.' After all, even as He was dying on the cross, Jesus sought to ensure His mother's well-being!

“The message of the good news which became the hallmark of the New Testament church from its very inception, is the announcement of the new covenant community being formed in Christ. The corporate life of the church, immediately followed by Pentecost, experienced a *communal life with a domestic character* [my emphasis]. In describing those first believers, Luke recalls that ‘day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts’ (Acts 2:46). This commitment to each other as brothers and sisters in a new community of love and faith captures exactly the import of Jesus’ own teaching, ‘*Who are my mother and my brothers?*’ *And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother’* (Mk. 3:33-35)” (1985, p.144).

Anderson and Guernsey (1985, pp.144ff) continue: we should note here that this new family of God, constituted as the *koinonia* of Christ, is itself the original order of humanity as portrayed in the covenant people of Israel (1985, pp.44ff). Seen against the backdrop of the ancient tribal view of social existence, the Old Testament concept of the individual in community as determined by the covenant of Yahweh clearly breaks with the natural order. The filial bond, formed as a biological or natural order, gives way to the higher demand of covenant partnership. Kraus (cited in Anderson & Guernsey, 1985, p.146) says, “from the beginning, even as at the end, ‘the human family (community) living under God’s covenant of peace (*shalom*) is the goal of creation.’”

Anderson and Guernsey add (1985, p.146), “The church, as the family of God, sets forth a new criterion of worth, a new form of parity, and a new context of belonging for each person in the kingdom of God” [personal comment: note words like ‘family,’ ‘community,’ ‘belonging,’ etc. which all form part of my argument for church as house church – if one speaks with Christians in conventional churches, more often than not they don’t perceive their local church to be a true family, community, etc, with a sense of intimate belonging and being cared for. Often the size of the local church and its programmatic structure makes these things impossible].

It is really worth while giving a brief expansion of these aspects which, according to Anderson and Guernsey (1985, pp.146-148,150ff), undergird church as family:

- (a) Church as family sets forth a *new criterion of worth*: existence in a physical family provides limited worth, real worth lies in God's love for His people. This new worth is transcendental and permanent. After all, believers are restored in the image of God through adoption into His family. Husbands and wives are first of all 'brothers and sisters in Christ' in relationship with God their Father. Psalm 27:10 (NLT), *Even if my mother and father abandon me, the LORD will hold me close.*
- (b) Church as family sets forth a *new form of parity*: parity here means equivalence of share versus equality of role in relation. There are different functional roles in marriage and family, but full equivalence of partnership and worth. This parity is grounded in the *koinonia* of the family of God (note the anomaly of 'a ministry to singles' in the church today).
- (c) Church as family sets forth a *new context of belonging*: this emerges clearly e.g. in Galatians 6:10, which speaks of 'the household of faith.' 'Household' means more than the modern nuclear family, for it includes not only parents and children but other relatives and even servants that live with them (note the African extended family). Salvation comes not only to individuals but to households (Acts 16:31).

Bearing in mind that the renewal movement in the Roman Catholic Church following Vatican II strongly emphasized the domestic aspect of the church, Anderson and Guernsey (1985, p.151) quote Pope John Paul I as saying (addressing a group of bishops from the USA in one of his few public speeches before his death), *"The Christian family is so important, and its role so basic in transforming the world and in building up the kingdom of God, that the Council called it a 'domestic church.'"*

The authors (1985, p.151) go on to quote Roman Catholic theologian David Thomas's comment on the Pope's statement,

“We are invited to make present the love of God in human form. This takes place *in* the relationships in the family and *in* the relationships of the family to outsiders. These can be called sacramental relationships... These are charisms, extraordinary gifts given by God, that qualify the recipients as ministers of the Lord, true disciples of the living Lord who remains alive especially through their many expressions of generosity, care, and service.”

Anderson and Guernsey (1985, p.151) continue: the willingness of a Roman Catholic theologian like David Thomas not only to think of the church as a domestic unit (family) but to suggest that the relationships that take place in the domestic life of the church are of a sacramental nature reveals to us how seriously some are beginning to identify church with family. To quote Thomas further, “One of the problems of family life in contemporary society is the isolation felt by the individual nuclear family.”

Thomas (cited in Anderson and Guernsey, 1985, p.151) then goes on to suggest that the church will need to *reconstitute family through the facilitating of a ‘domestic church’ as a basic cell of the larger ecclesiastical unit. These cells, or ‘block units,’ will begin to function like ‘households of faith.’ They will perform many functions, including some aspects of education, stabilization of economic existence for members of the group, prayer and liturgy, and even the evangelization of the larger community in which they exist*” [‘shades’ of Acts 2, etc: personal comment].

Anderson and Guernsey ask (1985, p.153),

“To what family, or household of faith, does the family belong without losing its character as a domestic community where ordinary and daily life is affirmed and supported? Doesn’t this mean, then, that the church itself must become the ‘household of faith?’ And if so, won’t this mean that the church becomes both the sanctification and celebration of that commonality (*koinonia*) that exists between people who are the ‘friends’ of Jesus and who exist for and with each other? Should these ‘households of faith,’ by whatever definition or form they take, be the centre of the liturgical life of the people of God, even as they are the source of nourishment and support for the daily and ordinary life of the members? Shouldn’t Christian baptism be baptism into ‘a household of

faith,' where one is immediately joined with other 'brothers and sisters,' and shouldn't the eucharist be celebrated by and with those who have a stake in each other's 'daily bread?' Until this takes place, **how can the church be the people of God? And how can renewal of the family take place without the renewal of the 'household of faith' itself?"** [My emphasis]. God is family!

R and J Banks (1998, pp.30ff) have a most useful section on 'The Church's Homelike Emphasis.' They make a very valid point when they say that in congregations today family terms are used too loosely – members refer to their church as 'a family' or 'the family of God' when most have only a very limited knowledge of those terms and of one another. In other congregations, family terms are used in a purely spiritual sense, the bridge between members carrying only religious traffic. Paul particularly not only used family language as his primary vehicle of expression regarding the church but used it on a number of different levels:

- NT churches – whether in smaller or larger gatherings – met primarily in people's *homes*;
- Paul and the other apostles founded their churches primarily on converted households;
- the church in the home was the basic building block of the congregation; the bond between church members is similar to that between family members;
- congregations are described directly as the household of God;
- the central activities of these churches were familial in character;
- ministry – whether by resident members or visiting members – was basically modelled on a Christ-centred form of ministry exercised in the family; etc.

Thus for some early Christians the church family replaced the original family that they had lost upon conversion. For others relationships in their churches restored or deepened the family bonds that already existed. Paul also encouraged these early churches to take an interest in members of the broader Christian family by welcoming

visitors from other places, exchanging greetings through letters, and giving financial aid to the needy in other places. In all these ways Christians built up a genuinely 'ecumenical' (derived from the Greek word for 'house' or 'home') or wider familial relationship between churches in distant places (R and J Banks, 1998, p.33).

Gehring, in a treatise on this subject, draws our attention to what he calls an '*oikos ecclesiology*' - he cites Verner (2004, p.7), pointing to the concept of church as 'household of God' incorporating two aspects:

- a) the house or family is the fundamental unit of the church;
- b) the church is a social structure patterned after a household.

Gehring also cites Klauck (2004, pp.7-8) and his research on the word-pair '*oikos*'/'*oikia*' - these have a double meaning that can be observed in all of classical Greek and in the colloquial:

- a) house in the sense of living quarters, inhabited building;
- b) house as in family, extended family, clan.

At any rate, '*oikos*' is to be understood much more widely than our two English terms 'house' and 'family.' In its sociological meaning it includes not only father, mother and children, but slaves, clients and property as well.

Gehring (2004, p.47) adds,

"This image of the *familia Dei* was Jesus' favourite, most likely because it best communicated the theological essence of what Jesus was trying to impart.⁷⁶ He wanted to gather together the new eschatological people of God, in which the love of God reigns just as it does in the intimate relationship between Jesus and the Father. What the family of God meant and how it differed from the ancient understanding of the '*oikos*' was illustrated by Jesus all the more clearly because he was often in or in front of the house of Peter as he taught on the subject. Everyone could see how

⁷⁶ We shall be referring a little later in this chapter to 'Jesus, the Jewish theologian.' Let us not underestimate our Lord's theological perception in any way.

he and the disciples lived together. Jesus not only spoke theoretically of this new family of God - he called real people and he 'lived among them.' Nowhere was this more evident than in Peter's house in Capernaum. This overall perspective finds support in the observation that Jesus trained his disciples to do house-to-house and village-to-village outreach as well."⁷⁷

So also, according to Gehring (2004, p.119), the apostle Paul built on 'oikos' in the ancient world, just as Jesus did in His pre-Easter mission. Here we may note the relevant passages in Acts 16 (houses of Lydia and the Philippian jailer), Acts 17 (house of Jason in Thessalonica), Acts 18 (house of Titius Justus, next to the synagogue in Corinth), etc. Cities with demonstrable and multiple house churches would include (2004:130ff): Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth (5 house churches?), Cenchrea, Ephesus, Rome (5 house churches?), Colosse, Laodicea and Nympha. (Gehring explores the importance of the 'oikos' and family terminology which was so dear to Paul, further: 2004, pp.152-153,162-164)

Thus the ancient 'oikos' with its network of relationships (2004, p.92) also provided a very favourable opportunity for evangelistic contacts. In this setting it would have been very natural to pass on the Christian message from person to person, householder to householder, slave to slave.⁷⁸

Gehring (2004, p.93) comments on the outward impact of the house churches in Jerusalem: One of the prerequisites for this impact was again the *oikos*, in which the attractive elements of this fellowship became visible to those outside of the faith. An integral part of this scenario was not only the architectural features of a house, its living room, kitchen, and so forth, but also its sociological features, the family, the real people living in community with one another. Gehring cites Vogler (cited in 2004, p.93), "The way Christians lived in community with one another in spite of their social differences, the fact that they made the needs of one the concern of all... all of this generated a power that flowed out from their community, requiring and producing a response..."

⁷⁷ The writer believes it would be very difficult to argue from Scripture that Jesus' choice of homes in His ministry was purely coincidental, and that it did not form part of His kingdom strategy. More on this later...

Moreover, these (house) groups were compellingly attractive, drawing others into their midst.”

Gehring (2004, p.298) concludes that in some respects the architectural and particularly the social image of the ancient ‘oikos’ “becomes the determining image for ecclesiology, church development, leadership structures, and the social relationships of Christians in community. The well-organised household became the model for a well-organised church... The house churches of the Pastoral Letters understood themselves essentially as the ‘household or family of God,’ and it is therefore fully legitimate to speak here of an ‘**oikos ecclesiology**’ [my emphasis]. Even *leadership structures* [my emphasis] and functions emerged from the household setting. The biblical values and roles of the Christian family would eventually, like salt and light, permeate non-Christian society and their understanding of family and leadership.

Seen in this light, the *house church* represents a very flexible model architecturally, financially, and socially, which can be very useful across both geographical and cultural boundaries (Gehring, 2004, p.304). It can also make a significant contribution in the industrialized countries of the West. The house church is small and personal, providing a setting for accountability to each other. It has the potential of overcoming the anonymity of a larger church. Particularly in Western society, where the living and working climates are often quite impersonal, house churches provide “the opportunity for intimate and accountable fellowship, in which personal encounters, human warmth, and trusting, long-lasting relationships can be experienced” (Lorenzen, cited in 2004:304). This will become even more important in the upcoming age of mass media, which will radically isolate people from one another.

The house church can also serve as an effective agent against the tendency to separate doctrine from everyday life, a contribution that should not be underestimated. House church leaders know the individuals in their congregation and are therefore more able to prepare their ‘sermons’ and Bible studies to meet the real and felt needs of the members of their group.

3.3.

The church as ‘the body of Christ.’

We are of course referring here to the church as *body of Christ* in this world, i.e. as Christ’s hands, feet, ‘presence,’ etc., by the indwelling and giftings of the Spirit.

3.3.1.

What does this mean?

Bonhoeffer (1963, pp.99-100) responded,

“In the church Christ is at work as with an instrument. He is present in it; as the Holy Spirit is with the individual, so Christ makes himself present in the congregation of the saints. If we take the thought of the body of Christ seriously, then it means that this ‘image’ identifies Christ and the church, as Paul himself clearly does (1 Cor. 12:12, 6:5); for where my body is, there too am I. From this conviction that Christ himself is the church there arises the idea of an organic life in the church, in accordance with the will of Christ, from this image of a living organism. Thus Christ is really present only in the church. The church is in him and he is in the church (1 Cor. 1:30, 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16, 13:5; Col. 3:9, 2:17), and ‘to be in Christ’ is the same as ‘to be in the church.’”

He continues (1963, p.101),

“The social significance of Christ is decisive. He is only present in the church, that is, where the Christian community is united by preaching and the Lord’s Supper for brotherly love... There can be no thought of a second incarnation of Christ (say, in an individual man), but rather we must think of a revelatory form in which ‘Christ exists as the church.’ Only then can we grasp that Paul can speak in the indicative: ‘You are the body of Christ’” (1 Cor. 3:16, 6:9, 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:30).

According to Snyder, the metaphor *the body of Christ* firstly expresses a structural principle, viz. *the church’s unity under Christ’s headship*. The principle of unity is the principle of many organs in one body – i.e. organic, genetic, cellular structures (Jn. 15:1-8; Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-26; Eph. 4:15-16). This principle holds good at every level

of the church. “Thus, valid structures for unity should be based on a charismatic-organic model, rather than an institutional/hierarchical one” (2004, p.206).

Snyder (2004, pp.204-207) asks the question, which is more essential to effective gospel proclamation: cooperative evangelistic efforts or the visible unity of the church itself? The answer is rightly that they are inseparable – while cooperative witness is to be encouraged in many areas, such witness must be integrally linked to the life and discipling of local communities of believers. In John 17 Jesus prayed for the oneness of all believers, not merely for cooperation in evangelism. “Both the evangelistic mandate and the ecumenical motive summon us to an ongoing quest for the biblical understanding of the people of God, the body of Christ.”

Certainly, the dramatic expansion of the early church was due to the remarkable unity and love displayed among Christians, so that that even those outside of the church were impressed by the dynamic within it.⁷⁹

To this end Snyder argues for two practical outcomes:

- (a) Priority should be given to the expression of Christian unity especially in today’s urban centres (e.g. regular mass rallies in order to bring a sense of ‘the people of God’ across denominational and confessional lines);
- (b) Some form of global structure (para-church rather than super-church) for unified fellowship and mission in order to strengthen the church’s witness in the world (a nerve centre, a facilitating/co-ordinating/communicating structure of churches and networks of churches – duplication and institutionalism to be avoided at all costs). The unity thus fostered will be both spiritual and visible.

3.3.2.

However, **we cannot separate the metaphor of the church as ‘body’ from church as ‘family’** – Gehring (2004, pp.162-165), in his *House Church and Mission*, has a whole section that underpins the fact that, as important as the metaphor of church as body is (especially for Paul), one cannot separate church as the body of Christ and church as the family of God. The image of the body of Christ essentially grew out of the statement

⁷⁹ In the writer’s estimation, it is unfortunate that in our day there are those who still persist with the largely N. American idea of evangelistic gatherings or ‘crusades’ in local churches and other places as the primary means of evangelism. This is so even in the writer’s denomination. This approach often inoculates believers against the real thing, viz. a lifestyle of reality and witness.

re the believer's identity 'in Christ,' and appears for Paul to be a function of the christologically-reflected notion of the people of God. Considering a key text like 1 Corinthians 10:17, for example, it is apparent that two components work together in our understanding of the body of Christ:

- the concept of sacramental participation in the eucharistic body of Christ;
- the concept of an organism in which the members cooperate with one another.

The body of Christ results from participation in the bread. In this one bread Christ shares Himself and the produce of His work on the cross with believers; the bread thereby has a unity-building function.⁸⁰ To quote Roloff (cited in Gehring, 2004, p.162), "The reception of this bread by the believers causes them to be united with Christ as the one and only Savior and thus to be united with one another."

3.3.3.

The 'body of Christ' is also *incarnational* in its life and witness.

Frost and Hirsch (2003, p.40) touch on this. According to them, emerging churches all around the world are now trying to find ways in which to embody the gospel in an incarnational way.

"Whether it be *ThirdPlace Communities* in Tasmania, where the community commits to always gather in public social spaces and never in private sacred buildings⁸¹, or the church of which Michael (Frost) is part (marvellously

⁸⁰ As Grudem (1994, p.955), writing on Communion as 'a means of grace within the church,' correctly points out, "... when a person participates in faith, renewing or strengthening his or her own trust in Christ for salvation, and believing that the Holy Spirit will bring spiritual blessing through such participation, then certainly additional blessing may be expected. We must be careful here, as with baptism, to avoid the mistake of overreacting to the Roman Catholic teaching and maintaining that the Lord's Supper is *merely symbolic* and not a means of grace. Paul says, 'The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a *participation* (Gk. *Koinonia*, 'sharing,' 'fellowship') in the blood of Christ?...' Because there is such a sharing in the body and blood of Christ (apparently meaning a sharing in the benefits of Christ's body and blood given for us), the unity of believers is beautifully exhibited at the time of the Lord's Supper."

⁸¹ While some may feel that they cannot experience the numinous in places not specially set apart for religious purposes, the writer would argue that such a sentiment limits the sovereignty of God Who sanctifies any so-called common place. For example, some of my most numinous spiritual experiences have taken place in a squatter's shack while ministering to/with the poorest of the poor. Consider here also the example of Jacob at Bethel – Genesis 28:16-17. The writer understands of course the helpfulness of certain architecture, e.g. the cathedral type, in aiding us in our understanding of God's

named *Small Boat, Big Sea*) where people experience a culturally seamless expression of Jesus, or the Breakfast Club in Pomona where the experience of church is built around the natural conversation of a breakfast table – for them, at least, it is in these struggling little communities that the hope of the gospel in the West resides. For in such ways the biblical prophecy of the incarnation of God in Jesus will once again be true in our day, that people living in darkness might once again see a great light (Mt. 4:16).”

Frost and Hirsch conclude (2003, pp.153-154),

“Many might be content with the classic model and its implications for ministry and mission, but for us there are serious issues of vital strategic importance involved when it comes to trying to experiment with new forms of *Jesus communities* (my emphasis) and in trying to develop forms of incarnational-contextualised mission. To birth a truly missional-incarnational church, we need a new tool.”

3.3.4.

The church as ‘body of Christ’ implies *diversity*, i.e. the church exists as one body with many ‘members.’

We mention here again the *priesthood of all believers*, [in the writer’s opinion] commonly confessed but seldom practiced: witness the persistent clergy-laity distinction, the hierarchical structures in just about every form of conventional church, etc.⁸²

transcendence – the writer and his wife, in visits to the UK, experienced this in many cathedrals and other stately church buildings, e.g. St. Paul’s, Canterbury Cathedral, etc. The writer is of the opinion that one should be able to experience God’s transcendence also in His immanence – picture the manger-scene of our Lord’s birth. (see Rudolf Otto’s classic *The Idea of the Holy* for an exposition of the *Mysterium Tremendum*)

So also, when Jesus was condemnatory of the money-changers in the temple, He was not protecting the temple itself but demonstrating the Pharisees’ hypocrisy – witness His teaching in John 2:19-21, 4::21-24, etc.

⁸² Even in the writer’s own denomination, which strongly endorses the ‘priesthood of all believers,’ there is in many churches the idea that the ‘pastor’ is somewhat different (elevated) in comparison with the person in the pew. We often still use the title ‘Reverend’ when referring to ourselves in this denomination and when introduced to congregations, etc. What a breath of fresh air the house church is. It truly practises the priesthood of believers.

Dulles (1987, p.38), who favours church as institution, indicates that the institutionalised Church as defined in Vatican 1 is “not a community of equals in which all the faithful have the same rights. It is a society of unequals, not only because among the faithful some are clerics and some are laymen, but particularly because there is in the Church the power from God whereby to some it is given to sanctify, teach, and govern, and to others not.”

Interestingly, this statement was challenged at Vatican II by Bishop Emile De Smedt (Dulles, 1987, p.39) – he spoke of the pyramidal pattern in which all power is conceived as descending from the pope through the bishops and priests, while at the base the faithful people play a passive role and seem to have a lower position in the church. He reminded the conciliar Fathers that in the Church all have the same fundamental rights and duties, so that popes and bishops, together with lay persons, are to be reckoned among the faithful people of God! Dulles(1987:42) adds that since 1950, the Roman Catholic Church has been less institutionalised.

The ‘controversial’ Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng (1986, pp.383ff,387) writes as follows concerning the priesthood of all believers:

“We must then conclude, inverting Jerome’s formulation that the particular ‘share’ (*clerus*) of the Lord is precisely not just the clergy, but the whole people of God; and Christ is the ‘share’ not just of the clergy, but of the whole people of God. The word *clerus* too, therefore, belongs to the whole Church, and not just to those who hold office in it... Our conclusions, drawn on the basis of the New Testament,⁸³ about the words ‘priest,’ *spiritualis* and *clerus*, are simply an extension and application of what was said above about the word *ecclesia*, ‘Church’: the *ecclesia* is not made up simply of

⁸³ Küng (1986, pp.386-387) argues that in the early church there were differences of spiritual gifts and tasks to fulfill, but there was no distinction between a group called clergy and a group called laity. The careless use of the term ‘laity’ to apply to the priestly people of God, unless it held office in the Church, was matched by the taking over by the holders of office of the term *clerus*. This was to overlook the fact that the latter term in the NT cannot be identified at all with a share in the office of the Church. Indeed, in 1 Peter 5:2ff the word *kleros* seems precisely to refer to communities as being a share allotted to the elder. The word has a much wider sense: see also Acts 8:21, Acts 26:17ff, Colossians 1:12, etc.

those who in past centuries have often been collectively spoken of as ‘the Church,’ but is made up of *all* believers; and thus *all* are priests and clergy.”

Stibbs (in 1968, p.94) cites Best, “There is no suggestion that those with different functions (in the church) stand in a different relationship to Christ.” He adds,

“This is an important truth, because it denies in principle the idea prevalent in some quarters that the Church consists of clergy or hierarchy and a dependent laity. For while Christians do in measure all depend upon one another, they all primarily depend upon the living Christ Himself, and draw life and grace directly from Him through faith alone. He is the one ‘high priest over the house of God’ ... There is in the Church of Christ no priesthood limited, as in the old Israel, to a select class. The priesthood is the priesthood of all believers” (Col. 2:9; Heb. 10:19-22; 1 Tim. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:5,9).

Anglican Watson (1978, p.250)⁸⁴ stated his view clearly and practically on the matter of the priesthood of all believers, viz. that in the biblical sense all Christians are priests and clergy, and that this is a crucial starting-point if we are to re-discover the true concept of ministry and leadership within the church. Through the gifts of God’s Spirit, various ministries will develop within a local church (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:8-10, 28; Rom. 12:6-8) which are in no way confined to a paid, professional, theologically-trained and episcopally-ordained ministry. He went on to say, “The two-class system of priest and people, clergy and laity, professional⁸⁵ and amateur, has been disastrous in stifling the growth of the church and in quenching the life of the Spirit. It is partly for this reason that the great variety of spiritual gifts has been so little understood and experienced by the body of Christ as a whole.”

⁸⁴ The writer and his wife were privileged to visit David Watson’s parish in York during the 1970’s and could experience first-hand the spiritual vibrancy of the work he was pioneering and overseeing.

⁸⁵ The writer (tongue in cheek) recalls how in his last pastorate, which we sought to base on the priesthood of all believers, a powerful elder would insist in meddling in pastoral areas where he was least gifted (with disastrous consequences) - however, when confronted with the difficult and controversial, e.g. an exorcism, would say, ‘let’s call in the professionals – this is your call, pastor!’

Writing on the priesthood of all believers, Hull (1988, p.126) maintains that the abolition of a class of people called laity should be a priority for the church. He asserts that out of the ashes of the laity's demise will arise the church's renewal. Hull maintains the first Reformation took the Word of God exclusively out of the hands of the clergy and put it into the hands of the people. The 'second Reformation' is to get the ministry exclusively out of the hands of the clergy and into the hands of the people, where it rightly belongs.

Peterson (2007, pp.10-13), writing on 'the purification of means' in the church, is devastating in his criticism of our culture's (secular and ecclesial – certainly not from the Bible or the gospel) imposition of the clergy-laity distinction, which, to his mind, has led to the crippling passivity of church members: "They get it from leaders who love the prerogatives and power of expertise, who bully people by means of their glamorous bravado into abdicating their original splendor of a new life in Christ and then declining into the wretched condition of the consumer. The consumer is passivity objectified: passive in the pew, passive before the TV screen, vulnerable to every sort of exploitation and seduction, whether religious or secular. And worst of all, passive in the matters of the ways and means in following Jesus, letting others who we think must know better tell us how to do it." ⁸⁶

Nearer home, South African scholars Buchanan & Hendriks (1995, pp.50ff), include in their compendium *Meeting the Future* a most helpful contribution by Henwood (at the time Dean of St. Mary's in the centre of Johannesburg, with a special interest in inner

⁸⁶ The writer commends Peterson's (a Presbyterian) exposure of 'The Laity Myth' (2007, pp.10ff): "I want Christian men and women to carry the designation layperson boldly into workplace and marketplace, home and church... they are the *people* of God (*laos* in the Greek of the New Testament is 'people') ... Within the Christian community there are few words that are more disabling than 'layperson' or 'laity.' The words convey the impression – an impression that quickly solidifies as a lie – that there is a two-level hierarchy among the men and women who follow Jesus. There are those who are trained, sometimes referred to as 'the called,' the professionals who are paid to preach, teach, and provide guidance in the Christian way, occupying the upper level. The lower level is made up of everyone else, those whom God assigned jobs as storekeepers, lawyers, journalists, parents, and computer programmers. It is a bare-faced lie, insinuated into the Christian community by the devil (who has an established reputation for using perfectly good words for telling lies). It is a lie because it misleads a huge company of Christians into assuming that their workplace severely limits their usefulness in the cause of Christ, that it necessarily confines them to part-time work for Jesus as they help out on the margins of kingdom work."

city ministry and ecumenical work as founder-member of the Inner City Ministries Forum and the Greater Johannesburg Alliance of Churches), entitled *Uninvolved Laity*. A number of his insights are highly germane to our subject under discussion, and in many ways support the basic argument of this dissertation in connection with NT-based house churches:

- The realignment of the understanding of ministry as a call of all its members, clerical and lay, is of the utmost importance as we face the future of our land and its peoples:

“Henwood views the early church pattern of the New Testament church, where believers gathered in houses and all members played an active role, as the ideal model of ministry. Analysing the existing ministry patterns, he describes how the political and economical factors played a role in developing a patient-client model with the church perceived as a club rendering social and other services.⁸⁷ Ministry emanates from the church (club) building and all the emphasis is placed on ministering to the gathered community with programmes aimed at satisfying the needs of club members. Secularism and consumerism intensify the inward-looking club mentality resulting in disempowering people, especially those who were the victims of apartheid” (Buchanan & Hendriks, 1995, p.50).⁸⁸

- From interviews of ministers/pastors from different denominations involved in inner city Johannesburg), it became clear to Henwood (1995, p.51) that on the whole the ministry remains the prerogative of the ordained/professional minister - note the following statements: ‘It is a minister’s church and not a member’s church;’ ‘It is a pulpit-, rather than pew-driven church;’ ‘It is a clergy-, rather than a lay-driven church;’ ‘Ordained ministry is the only authentic and real ministry;’ etc.
- Henwood states,

⁸⁷ For an excellent explanation of what Henwood calls the ‘patient-client model,’ see pp. 53-54 of his article. The “**professional cleric prescribes and offers services and is available at all times to provide for the needs of the community**” (p.53).

⁸⁸ Anyone who has pastored a congregation in South Africa will know that this is an accurate description of the ‘ministry status quo’ in most churches today.

“It has become clear to me that one of the most significant factors preventing the full participation and involvement of the laity in ministry is the accepted and expected role of the ordained/professional minister. This may be a harsh and unpalatable statement for the clergy to accept, but I believe it to be true and also to be a challenge for the clergy to accept as they participate in the shaping of the church for the future... I do not believe that the clergy are solely responsible for this situation, but that they are as much victims of the history of the models of ministry in the church as they are participants in it.”⁸⁹

- Henwood (1995, pp.52-53) continues,

“During the Apostolic times the church was not at all clericalized. Each local group of believers that was established by the apostles was a church, tied together not by a building but by preaching, letters, collections for local communities in need and the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42-47)... The meetings were in households, in the houses of members; the functions of the groups were distributed among the gifted and thus ministries were initiated (Acts 6:2-7)... This was the pattern of the first century. Since then with the rapid growth in the number of members and geographical locations of Christian communities, together with the interaction of ‘telling the Good News’ within the culture and the economical, social and political structures of various decades, the model of church and ministry has changed. The model has shifted from one of small informal groups to one of highly developed hierarchies with cathedrals and symbols of power that parallel the medieval courts and princes and later colonial power structures. In the West this ongoing interaction of the Gospel with the prevailing culture has led to the present model of the church and its ministry, with an emphasis on service rather than community. The model is now one of efficiency, of flow charts

⁸⁹ Close on four decades of pastoral/denominational ministry tells the writer that these words are just so true! The average minister/pastor gets caught up in the ‘system,’ and it is virtually impossible to break out of the mould. Things concerning the church look very different when one is able to look at things from ‘outside of the system,’ as has been my privilege for the past three and a half years. ***It is difficult, if not impossible, to see thing clearly from ‘within the system/institution.’***

and programmes, rather than one which emphasizes the gifts of its members... This model, I believe, is at the root of the uninvolved laity syndrome of our present age, and is deeply entrenched in the minds and practices of the modern day church. The church in this land has been shaped by the political and sociological history of the country and this too has led to the situation in which we have the practice of a 'clericalized church.'

- Finally, speaking on 'the church gathered imbalance,' Henwood adds that for many people, both clergy and laity, the word 'church' primarily evokes the concept of the gathered people of God - that group of people which gathers together from time to time, usually on a Sunday, in a building called church. It is within that gathering that ministry is to be found and exercised. In this model, ministry emanates from the church building and all the emphasis is placed on ministry to that gathered community. Much of the energy and resources of the community and its ministers is expended on maintaining that community, the church building and programmes that will keep that community satisfied.⁹⁰

3.3.5.

Thinking further about the diversity within the body of Christ, we note also the scriptural mandate to practice **spiritual gifts as sovereignly dispensed by the Head of the the church through the Holy Spirit** (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12; Eph.4). The end is the maturation of the church for ministry both within the body as well as in the world. The world needs an experience of faith, love and hope (1 Cor. 13), and the only way the church can share this is through the united functioning of a wide diversity of spiritual gifts, so that our approach is *holistic*, addressing people as persons and communities in all the diversity of their humanness and need.

⁹⁰ Buchanan & Hendriks (1995, p.181) include an article by **Brian Germond**, at the time of writing an Anglican rector on the Reef, dealing with 'involvement of the laity.' He concludes his article thus: "it should be apparent that the mobilization of the laity is not something that can simply be tacked onto the existing structures of a church. Rather, it involves a radically new way of thinking and operating which necessitates the changing of the whole congregational culture. It requires a clearly articulated theology formulated in accordance with a corporate vision of God's purposes for that congregation, and the formulation of appropriate structures administered by new styles of leadership... what is needed is nothing less than a revitalization and transformation of our congregations."

Unfortunately, according to Snyder (1996, pp.140ff), the church in its institutional form often makes little room for diverse, spontaneous spiritual gifts – worse, it does not need spiritual gifts to order to function more or less successfully (according to Snyder). In this mode, spiritual gifts are often replaced by aptitude, education and technique.

Snyder (1996, pp.141ff) also points out the Western church's tendency to over-individualise the gospel to the detriment of its communal and collective aspects, whereas Paul for example emphasized diverse spiritual gifts as necessary for mutual edification (1 Cor. 12:7; Rom. 12:5). The community of believers acts as the controlling context for the exercise of gifts, thus discouraging individualistic aberrations. Here once again the NT analogy of the body is helpful.

According to Snyder (1996, p.142), *small Word-based groups* are especially useful with regard to spiritual gifts and the corporate body of Christ. The small, Spirit-led group builds community and provides the context for both the awakening of gifts and disciplining their use. Through many such small groups, the larger community of the church is edified. Mains is helpful (cited in Snyder, 1996, p.144) when he says, "How disabled the body has become because our primary purpose for church attendance has been to hear one man exercise his gifts, rather than to prepare all the people to develop their gifts of ministry, not only within the church but also to society."

[The writer has personally witnessed the helpfulness of diverse spiritual gifts in church-planting, even in cross-cultural situations. Here even a small house church can have a meaningful impact on its community and beyond. Two good examples would be ministry to HIV Aids victims as well as ministry to the poorest of the poor. Imagine the impact of gifts of compassion, encouragement, healing, etc. and the reflection of Christ's person in a Christian unit such as a healthy, spiritual gifts-practising house church. ⁹¹]

⁹¹ Simson (1998, pp.124-129), in his *Houses That Change the World* has an interesting section on the church's general neglect of spiritual gifts, including the so-called 'five-fold gifts' of Ephesians 4. We need to be cultivating these gifts and the kind of healthy (chemically-balanced) 'soil' needed for the emergence of these gifts.

3.4.

The key-concept of *koinonia* as regards the church. [When we speak of *koinonia*, we speak of that unique *fellowship/community* (lit. *participative sharing in*) to be found in Christ and in His body alone]

Jewett (1974, pp.226-227) pointed out how that it was in the early second century, with the rise of the monarchical bishop, that the institutional form of the church became rapidly episcopal and the church's unity was founded in the bishops, to the detriment of the fellowship of the saints. "Concomitantly (1974, p.226) with this development in the institutional form of the church, the original NT emphasis on fellowship and brotherhood (*koinonia*) recedes into the background. Although the churches emerging from the Reformation have rejected all claims to papal absolutism, yet they have also had to struggle, if to a lesser degree, to keep the church from being a mere institution."

Watson (1978, pp.17,85-87), having already made the point that church renewal involves the embodiment of the Gospel, *community*, relationships, etc, has much to say about the subject of the church as community:

- The pressures of our secular world have led to the breakdown of community and relationships all round (e.g. mobility of jobs, depersonalisation of human beings in a computerised society, materialism, marital infidelity). The concept of the small nuclear family is comparatively modern. Watson asks a very practical question viz., apart from community, what real support can be given to the numerous single and divorced members of many churches? (also to widows/widowers, the mentally disadvantaged, etc).
- In the light of this, Watson (1978, p.86-88) and his family gave themselves to a kind of community life (in fact Watson and his church in York developed some six 'extended households' at the time of his writing) - he testified that the price was high but the fruits were amazing in terms of building relationships and developing a sense of community in his parish. [the 'how' of their experience, and some fascinating insights for overcoming the common reasons for such community-life failures today, are described in 1978, pp.89ff,100ff] [He also mentions the

enrichment of visiting a monastic community to learn about community life as it can be practised in our day. He concludes (1978, p.93) that such community life should become more normative within the ranks of most local churches]

- Relationships do not just happen - they must be worked on with much prayer and patience. This will involve making ourselves vulnerable and even getting hurt.

“The constant temptation is to erect a polite wall, within which we may still do the tasks that are strictly required of us, but we cease to relate at any depth to those around us. We become instead an atomised group of individuals, which soon destroys the life of the community. (Watson from time to time returns to Benedict and others, who practised relationships and community life in history past, and have so much to teach us today (1978, pp.92-93)

- To conclude, on the subject of the church and community, Watson (1978, p.94) says,

“As local churches we need much more consciously to become a warm and accepting community of the people of God, where the outsider feels welcome, loved and served. The most practical expression of this, for most churches and in the first instance at any rate, may be in the context of home meetings... There should also develop a community sense of the people of God in any given locality - village, town, city, district, county or diocese. If any mark is to be made on the political and social scene, corporate action on this scale will almost always be necessary.

According to Kesich (1999, pp.10-14), building community is the fruit of the cross and resurrection of Christ. Fellowship (*koinonia*) in the NT church included:

- sharing ordinary meals which were at the same time Eucharistic;
- prayer (in the temple and in homes);
- baptism of those who had confessed Christ;
- meetings in homes which served as Christian synagogues or house churches;

- development of distinctly Christian worship in these house churches;
- engagement in economic *koinonia* as a voluntary matter (in contrast to the mandatory requirements of Qumran communities);
- care for the poor;
- amazing expansion both numerically and in terms of ‘discipleship-commitment.’

Kesich’s understanding (1999, pp.22-29) of the phenomenal expansion of the church in the context of true *koinonia* is noteworthy. It expanded into Judea and Samaria, Damascus and Galilee, Antioch by 35 AD. The Roman authorities noted the mixed community of Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11), a veritable ‘third race.’

Snyder (2004, pp.54ff) rightly traces Christian *koinonia* back to the community-image of the Trinity. God is in a permanent conversation of love, and this is a pattern for His church. He cites Bonino (2004, p.55) on the Trinity: “God is in himself a permanent conversation, a communion of love, an identity of purpose and unity of action: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” The Trinity is therefore not an enigma to be solved but rather “a model on which all human relations, *including the church* should be structured.”

The Trinity has profound social implications: “Neither the all-embracing authority of one over others, nor an undifferentiated mass uniformity, nor the self-sufficiency of the ‘self-made man,’ but the *perichoresis* (mutual, shared ‘dance’ or interaction) of love is our beginning and our destiny – as persons, as church, as society” (Bonino as cited in Snyder, 2004, p.55).

Snyder (2004, pp.56-57) also cites Gunton in pointing out the weakness of Western Trinitarian theology (following Augustine), with serious negative implications for ecclesiology. As he sees it, in the Western Christian tradition, in contrast to Eastern Orthodoxy, there has long been a tendency to treat the doctrine of the Trinity as a problem rather than as encapsulating the heart of the Christian Gospel. It is as if one had to establish one’s Christian orthodoxy by facing a series of mathematical and logical difficulties rather than by glorying in the being of God whose reality *as a communion of persons* [my emphasis] is the basis of a rational universe in which personal life may take

shape. Thus influenced by Augustine's Neo-Platonic theology, Western Christianity has made the oneness of God prior to His three-ness, in this way prioritizing unity and uniformity over community and diversity. Relatedly, the Western tradition, following Augustine, has had difficulty maintaining a balanced emphasis on the full humanity of Christ {for Augustine, Gunton argues, the doctrine of the divinity of Christ is more important than His humanity (Snyder, 2004, pp.56-57)}.⁹² Thus these two tendencies – failure to maintain *equally* the oneness and threeness of God and failure to stress *equally* the humanity and deity of Christ, birthed an unbalanced ecclesiology. Gunton (Snyder, 2004, p.57) insists that the church is basically a community, a *koinonia* that is a sort of 'trinitarian echo.' Its calling is "to be a temporal echo of the eternal community that God is"... "the being of the church should echo the dynamic of the relations between the persons who constitute the deity." This means "an ecclesiology of perichoresis" in which "there is no permanent structure of subordination" but rather "overlapping patterns of relationships, so that the same person will sometimes be 'subordinate' and sometimes 'super-ordinate' according to the gifts and graces being exercised," as the church acts as God's instrument of reconciliation. One has to ask the question as to how much the conventional church today reflects the trinity in this way, even whether it is capable of doing so in a meaningful and practical way?

Snyder thinks we can learn something from the South American small base communities of the 1960's and 70's and quotes Boff in this regard (Snyder, 2004, p.45): "Christian life in the basic communities is characterized by the absence of alienating structures, by direct relationships, by reciprocity, by a deep communion, by mutual assistance, by communality of gospel ideas, by equality among members. The specific characteristics of society are absent here: rigid rules; hierarchies; prescribed relationships in a framework of a distinction of functions, qualities and titles."

⁹² See Gunton's (1997, pp.31,34,56) *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark) for his interesting perspective on the Trinity. Gunton traces historically how the major problems of the church's self-understanding today derive from a view of the Trinity influenced more by Greek philosophy and Islamic theology than the fathers of the first four centuries. Gunton maintains that "the question of the being of the church is one of the most neglected topics of theology" today.

As to the church's community and mission in the world, Snyder also quotes Costas (2004, p.47):

“If the kingdom of God represents the definitive reconciliation between God and humanity, between individuals, peoples, sexes, generations and races and between the rest of creation – a promise that will be fulfilled in the second coming of Christ – then the *communion of God's people is an overriding necessity* [my emphasis], in order that the world might understand what the salvation that God offers in the gospel really is. An equally imperious need is that the church seek communion with all of humanity and with the environment. The hope of the final reconciliation of creation must be demonstrated not only in the internal communion of the people of God, but also in a continuous effort for peace and reconciliation among nations and their inhabitants.”

Bonhoeffer wrote both theologically and passionately about *koinonia* in his little classic, *'The Life Together.'* He (1954, p.18-19) wrote about the 'fellowship' of Christians as a wonderful 'gift of grace,' even the physical presence of fellow-believers constituting an incomparable privilege and joy. We recognize in one another the Christ. It is something only experienced 'in Christ' (1954, pp.21,23,25) – it is not experienced on the basis of spirituality but on simply on the basis of being 'in Christ' (hence the danger of adding to this, the danger of 'something more'). It is based not on *eros* but on *agape*, i.e. the *agape* of God in Christ. It is such a freeing thing when compared to that false 'fellowship,' based on men's rules or personality or a thing rather than on Christ (1954, pp.31ff) [Bonhoeffer *practised NT koinonia* in his underground seminary in Finkenwalde].

[R & J Banks (1998, pp.129-131) relate a fascinating case-history of how an entire congregation was transformed following an adult Sunday School class's reading and application of the principles in Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* in *home churches*].

To be a little more contextual, it is interesting to note that in **African Traditional Religion**, virtue is often connected with the *communal* aspect of life, and is expressed, for example, in respect for parents and elders, appropriate raising of children, providing hospitality, etc.⁹³

Ejizu⁹⁴ (2008, p.1) adds this on the promotion of community-life in Africa:

“The sense of community and humane living are highly cherished values in African life. This statement remains true in spite of the apparent disarray in the experience of modern politics and brutal internecine wars in many parts of the Continent. For traditional Africans, the community is basically sacred... A visitor to Africa is soon struck by the frequent use of the first person plural ‘we,’ ‘ours’ in everyday speech.”

So also urbanised Africans frequently send substantial financial contributions to their rural home communities to support various development projects like provision of electricity and pipe-borne water, building of educational institutions, etc. Primary communities based on clan, or ethnic descent, or church affiliation abound in many modern cities. In traditional Africa, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. The individual can only say in the words of Mbiti (cited in Ejizu, 2008:1), “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.” The words ‘family,’ ‘brother,’ or ‘sister’ define far more for Africans than what they mean today for the average European or North American (2008, p.2). Furthermore, in the African mind community and religion are inseparable (2008, pp.3,9) – thus for most African groups, ostracizing an individual or group that has flagrantly disobeyed the community is thought to be the most severe punishment that could be meted out to any body (compare Num. 15:30; 1 Cor. 5:1-5). Such is the tremendous importance of community in traditional African thinking and practice. Ejizu (2008, p.10) adds that unfortunately the dramatic modern changes in the

⁹³ Mvuyekere, P., ed., 2003. World Eras Encyclopaedia (Volume 10), 2003. *African Traditional Religion*. (see especially pp.275-314). New York: Thomson Gale. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_traditional_religion [Accessed 8 March 2008].

⁹⁴ Ejizu, C.I., n.d. *African Traditional Religions and the Promotion of Community-Living in Africa*. Available at: <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/community.htm> [accessed 8 March 2008].

socio-political and religious aspects of life bring considerable pressure on the people's sense of community.⁹⁵

Even closer to home, as African Christians we have a cultural touch-point in the word *ubuntu*. It is a Zulu word which encapsulates, according to Wilson (2006, p.38), a unified vision of humanity as an interdependent community. It is expressed in the Zulu maxim, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (commonly attributed to the Kenyan, Mbiti), which can be roughly rendered "a person is a person through other persons," or, "I am what I am because of you." Clearly the identity of each individual is only fully realized through his or her relationship with other people.⁹⁶

How important it is to re-discover the 'family-ness' and fellowship of God's people today in our search for new, Bible-based and Spirit-inspired expressions of church.

Rick Warren (2002, pp.138-139), head of one of the biggest mega-churches in North America, gets it right when he says "When it comes to fellowship, size matters: *Smaller is better*. You can worship with a crowd, but you can't fellowship with one. Once a group becomes larger than about ten people, someone stops participating... Jesus ministered in the context of a small group of disciples. He could have chosen more, but he knew twelve is about the maximum size you can have in a small group if everyone is to participate."⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Bezuidenhout, in personal notes given to the writer, also underlines the importance of *fellowship* in African Traditional cosmology. She makes the point that *family* and *community* lie at the very core of African society, 'I exist because I belong to a community... I exist because I belong to a family.'

⁹⁶ Racokzy (2007, pp.76ff), in her study on Bonhoeffer, Taize and South Africa, makes the point that post-apartheid South Africa is struggling to find forms of community across the divides of race, class and culture. "In the broader context, the concept of *ubuntu*, of profound community and communal responsibility, is a foundation of African culture. A crucial question is how can *ubuntu* and the vision of community life as exemplified by Bonhoeffer and Taize mutually enrich and energise each other in concrete ways in South Africa?" She claims that Bonhoeffer's and Taize's ideals have taken root in various churches who now have "houses of studies/formation communities for their ministerial candidates." She claims that this has always been true in the Catholic Church, but now leaders of other Christian bodies speak about "formation issues." Combining the two challenges of *prayer and action* must be a constant guideline for the way forward.

⁹⁷ Warren promotes 'small groups' to develop the fellowship element of church life. Warren encourages every believer to join a small group in their church, whether it is "a home fellowship group, a Sunday

The spontaneous 'community life (oikos) evangelism' of the NT church.

In speaking about the spread of the early church, Glover (1965, p.63) reminds us of von Harnack's comment, "a living faith needs no special methods." Glover says it all began with *Jesus*. He chose twelve (Mk.3:14), 'that they may be with him.' That is all. The church spread over the world without social machinery. The Gospel was preached instinctively, naturally.

"The earliest Christians were persecuted in Jerusalem, and were driven out. I picture one of them in flight; on his journey he falls in with a stranger. Before he knows what he is doing, he is telling his fellow-traveller about Jesus. It follows on from his explanation of why he is on the road; he warms up as he speaks. He never really thought about the danger of doing so. And the stranger wants to know more; he is captured by the message, and he too becomes a Christian. And then this involuntary preacher of the Gospel is embarrassed to learn that the man is a Gentile; he had not thought of that. I think that is how it began - so naturally and spontaneously. These people are so full of the love of Jesus that they are bound to speak (Acts viii.4). 'One loving heart sets another on fire'" (1965, p.68).

Prior (1985, p.54) cites the renowned East African leader Festo Kivengere [Bishop of Uganda, who witnessed the E. African revival], "evangelism is the overspill of fellowship."

Lundy (2005, p.4), writing about the Church, *koinonia* & mission, says "the church, in order to truly fulfil her mission, must reflect that relational richness within her communal life. The *koinonia* of the early church must be part of her present-day *DNA* too (Acts 2:42, 44-47) if she is to be missional. Counter culturally, the church must be up close and personal if she is to be evangelistically significant."

school class, or a Bible study. This is where real community takes place, not in the big gatherings. If you think of your church as a ship, the small groups are the lifeboats attached to it" (2002, p.139).

Birkey (1988, pp.154-155) is of the opinion that NT evangelism was rooted in new converts' commitment to the church body i.e. the house church. "Their witness in evangelism was the overflow of their fellowship, their joyful life of praise, and their persistence in the apostles' teaching. In fact, everywhere they went, they evangelized, since they could not help speaking about what they had 'seen and heard' (Acts 4:20). They witnessed in the temple precincts as well as in their homes (Acts 5:42). When forced out of the temple environment, they simply shared their faith wherever they were scattered (Acts 8:1,4). "The New Testament does not instruct churches to set up programs of evangelism nor to engage in evangelism as we usually think of it today. Rather, it propagated its faith incarnationally, as every member committed to Christ's church shared his or her faith in daily life situations."

Snyder (1996, pp.134ff) endorses the same point, viz. that evangelism in the primitive church was essentially spontaneous, that little was said about evangelism *per se*. It is all part of the church's servant-role in the community and of the overflow of community itself.

"I would say rather, our emphasis should be evangelism through fellowship, and especially through *koinonia*... It is questionable whether the institutional church can have a significant evangelistic ministry today through traditional methods... Most of today's methods are too big, too slow, too organized, too inflexible, too expensive and too professional ever to be truly dynamic in a fast-paced high-tech society. If the contemporary church would shake loose from plan and program, from institutionalism and inflexibility, and would return to the dynamic of the early church, it must seriously and self-consciously build its ministry around the small group as basic structure" (1996, p.152).

4. A BIBLICAL-EXEGETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE CHURCH, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE BOOK OF ACTS

4.1.

The Book of Acts as an essentially *house church* paradigm – first, we examine the contribution of JESUS and His kingdom-ministry as reflected in the GOSPEL ACCOUNTS.

Before we turn to the Book of Acts as a major base for our case for simple/house church, we need to give attention to **its fundamental foundation, viz. *the life and kingdom-ministry of Jesus as reflected in the gospel accounts.***

Küng (1986, pp.73-74) states that that the Church is only made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ.

“In the *pre-Easter period*, Jesus, by his preaching and ministry, *laid the foundations* for the emergence of a post-resurrection Church. It is no accident that all the gospels are interested in Jesus’ preaching and ministry in the pre-Easter period down to the last detail. The emergence of the Church after Easter is directly connected with Jesus’ pre-Easter ministry; how is this? Jesus revealed the reign of God, promised for the future, in the present through his person and his ministry; he revealed sufficient to confront men with the hour of decision, the decision for belief or unbelief, obedience or disobedience... At the same time the effect of his message was a divisive one and, although he did not form into a group [is this entirely accurate? – writer], those Israelites who accepted his message in faith are decisively distinguished from those who rejected it as far as the coming reign of God is concerned. These are the sole aspirants to salvation, who belong to the future community of salvation at the end time. Apart from the twelve he chose a greater number of disciples who shared a way of life with him; the later members of the Church are those who were formerly disciples of Jesus of Nazareth” (1986, pp.73-74).

Dulles (1987, pp.207ff), writing on the meaning of discipleship and the first community of disciples, says:

“Without being adequate to the full reality of the Church, it has potentialities as a basis for a comprehensive ecclesiology” (1987, p.207).

Speaking about the roots of the ‘discipleship model’ he (1987, p.207) says that this can be “traced to the New Testament and even to the **earthly ministry of Jesus...** [my emphasis].

Further on he (1987, p.208) states, “Jesus then conceived the plan of choosing a small band of believers and training them under his own supervision so that they could be trusted to understand his real message and carry it to others, even after his death.”

Interestingly, when mentioning the inclusivity of the term ‘disciples’ in the early Church and the Book of Acts, Dulles uses ‘almost house church terminology’ [writer’s assessment] to describe the first community of disciples, and then goes on to document how the evangelists, Paul and others NT authors, focused on the church as a ‘community of disciples’ (1987, p.211):

“In the Book of Acts, which gives the canonical description of the earliest years of the Church, all Christian believers are called disciples, and the Church itself is represented as a way of life by which one follows Jesus (Acts 9:2, 22:4), who is himself the Way” (Jn. 14:6). Referring to John’s Gospel, Dulles cites Brown (1987, p.211): “Instead of writing of the rule or kingdom of God, John centres all imagery on Jesus as the one in whom the reign of God has been perfectly realized, so that inhering in him replaces entrance to the kingdom. Sacraments are signs through which Jesus gives and nourishes life. Church offices and even apostleship are of lesser importance when compared to discipleship, which literally is a question of (eternal) life and death.”

Dulles (1987, p.212) concludes re these first disciples,

“Among themselves they practised intense mutual love, caring for the poor and sick, the widows and the orphans, and extending hospitality to travellers. Contemplating the Christian community, the Romans were allegedly moved to exclaim, ‘See how they love one another.’⁹⁸ Conscious of the demands of discipleship, the faithful were prepared for imprisonment, exile, even death. Ignatius of Antioch, writing to the Romans on the way to his own execution, describes the martyr as the ‘genuine disciple of Jesus Christ.’”⁹⁹

Cullmann (1956, p.118), writing on the ‘Early Church,’ says “... it was the earthly Jesus who *laid the foundations of the church before his death* [my italics]. He adds that there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the words about the Church which Jesus spoke to Peter in Matthew 16:18 or to regard them as a later insertion of the early Church...”

Anderson, touching on ‘The Continuity and Discontinuity of the Early Christian Community’ (2006, pp.22ff), states that this first community was constituted by the tradition of the Twelve. The original disciples were reconstituted as apostles through the breath of the Spirit following the resurrection of Jesus (Jn. 20:22):

“... in their minds), the number twelve was a necessary structure of continuity, and after the ascension of Jesus, under Peter’s leadership, they

⁹⁸ Tertullian in his Apology 39:7.

⁹⁹ Writer’s comment: we must never under-estimate the Lord Jesus, theologically. He was able to confound even the temple experts at the age of 12! (Lk. 2:42ff). We need to set aside any notion of Jesus as this rather simple (I say it with respect), laid-back country preacher Who went around doing good. All His earthly life He lived as a Jew, schooling Himself in the Torah, the customs, etc. B.H. Young in a recent publication *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*, having studied under top Jewish scholar David Flusser for many years, asks (2007, p.xxi), “Who is Jesus of Nazareth? Here I will argue that Jesus is a theologian. In fact Jesus based his theology upon Judaism. Jesus never rejected his cultural and religious heritage. As a devout Jew, he was loyal to his people. The Christian belief system, however, is built in part upon the teachings of Jesus, but it ignores their solid foundation in Jewish theology.” Again (2007, pp.xxxiii-xxxv), “As Christians we tend to view Paul as the church’s first theologian... Christianity begins with Jesus... Jesus is a theologian. His rich genius and keen wit infuse his colourful parables and creative teachings preserved in the Gospel stories. Even though modern culture and religious persuasions make it difficult for a contemporary reader to comprehend his message in the same way that a Jewish listener could in the first century, the theological depth of Jesus cannot be overlooked. Jesus was every bit as much a theologian as the apostle Paul. In fact, Jesus’ training and experience as a learned teacher of Torah far surpassed that of Paul the Jewish apostle to the Gentiles.”
On the basis of the foregoing, the writer cannot believe that Jesus was confused and aimless about His ecclesiology as He set forth by His life and teachings to lay the foundations of His church.

chose Matthias to take the place of Judas on the basis that he was among those who were followers of Jesus from the beginning and who was a witness to his resurrection (Acts 1:15-26). Thus the church at Jerusalem began to “take shape **even prior to Pentecost** [my emphasis] based on the felt need for continuity and the constitution of a central point of authority and control. It was into this already established community that the Holy Spirit came, leading to the multiplication of believers among the Jews” (2006, p.23).

Beckham ¹⁰⁰ (2004, p.66) writes on the ‘Theological and Institutional Levels of the Church’ and begins by saying that the embryonic elements of the church that we see in the Book of Acts (leadership qualifications, rituals and creeds) formed around the life and the nature of the church **that Jesus established in the gospels** [personal emphasis].^{101 102} These elements are the ‘wineskins’ of the church. These institutional wineskins have continued to develop over the course of church history into programs, boards, committees, buildings, denominations and independent ministries. Some institutional elements have remained true to the original life and nature of the church. Others have not. Therefore, the modern institutional elements of the church must always be “judged against the original life and nature of the church as seen in Christ” (2004, p.66).

The danger is that the historical additions of the church will be stacked one upon the other until the life and nature of the church is so cluttered with institutional forms that the original life and nature is hidden.

¹⁰⁰ The writer was able to enjoy Dr. Beckham’s input at the International Cell Church Conference in Hong Kong in 1999. It was also so good, at that conference, to interact with leaders from the Chinese Church and other Asian countries. How much they have to teach us!

¹⁰¹ **Stott** (*The Spirit, the Church and the Word*) is cited in Beckham as follows (2004, p.66): “The contrasting parallel (Luke) draws between his two volumes was not between Christ and his church, **but between two stages of the ministry of the same Christ**” (writer’s emphasis).

Beckham (2004, p.65), draws attention to the fact that Luke’s two-volume work on the origins of Christianity constitutes one quarter of the NT (Luke ties his Gospel of the life of Christ and his history of the church together with a connecting summary in the first verses of his second volume, Acts 1:1-11).

¹⁰² Grudem quotes Millard Erickson (in 1994, p.855) to the effect of endorsing much of what is being said here concerning the ‘pre-Pentecost church,’ and to Jesus’ use of the word ‘church’ in Matthew’s gospel (16:18 and 18:17).

Giles (cited in Beckham, 2004, p.66) says the church develops at two levels: (a) the theological level and (b) the sociological level. The theological level of the development of the church is the original idea, life and dynamic of the church that Jesus established. The sociological level is the institutional elements of the church that began to develop in Acts and that continued in the course of church history. He suggests that 'the continuity to be seen lies at the theological level, not the sociological.' The life of the church must be maintained by returning to the theological level that is seen **in the life of Christ in the gospels** [my emphasis].

Beckham (2004, p.67) next asks, 'Does **Jesus** Know Anything About the Church?' and relates his experience in Thailand: ¹⁰³

"When I went to Thailand as a missionary in 1975 I overlooked **the importance of the gospels** [my emphasis]. During the first half of my 15 years as a church planter, I focused on learning how Paul did church. I suppose my neglect of the church in the Gospels is understandable, if not excusable. I followed the accepted approach. Study the Gospels in order to understand the life of Christ and then go to Acts and the Epistles in order to understand the church. Focusing primarily on the church in the Epistles produces an incomplete view of Jesus' ministry and of the church. It implies that the church at Pentecost emerged full-blown and independent of what happened in Jesus life. This approach suggests that Jesus was waiting around during His years of ministry until the authorities got mad enough to kill Him. Then the church could begin to operate. About half way through my time in Thailand the question came to me: can we learn anything about the church by studying how Jesus began the first church? Jesus said, 'I will build my church.' Did Jesus' church-starting strategy influence how His followers, including Paul, started churches? These questions drove me to study the church in the Gospels (the writer is suggesting that Beckham's conclusions are the same as many others at this time, who are focusing in a new way on the life of Jesus in the Gospels (e.g. Snyder, those in the cell church

¹⁰³ The writer's own conclusions about Jesus and the church relate strongly to those of Beckham's – maybe many others have related to his experience as well, therefore he includes it at this point.

movement, etc). To my surprise, I discovered a rich resource of church principles and methods. Out of that study I concluded that all of the churches in the New Testament, including Paul's, **were directly linked to the church seen in the Gospels. Jesus' ministry is the key to understanding the church at Pentecost, the church during its early formative history and the church in the twenty-first century** [my emphasis].

Beckham (2004, pp.67-68) then talks about 'Stages of the Church in the New Testament': "Expansion of the church in the New Testament is best understood as a process of several stages that flow out of the Gospels into the Book of Acts and the Epistles." These stages overlap and build upon each other:

- Jesus established the *DNA* of the first church. Through His public and private ministry Jesus modelled the design and nature of the church.
- The Holy Spirit was the mid-wife at the birth of the church at Pentecost and formed the new believers into basic home units.
- After Pentecost the first wave of new believers returned home. The Pentecost converts began Jesus' kind of church in their own cultures.
- Early church leaders went to areas surrounding Jerusalem. Philip, Peter, John and undoubtedly others seeded the church in cities in Judea and Samaria.
- Persecution resulted in expansion of the church in 'all the world.'
- Churches such as Antioch in particular, sent out church planters. Barnabas, Paul and Mark established churches that were linked to Jesus through Antioch back to Jerusalem.
- Churches spread into Europe.

"The church at each of these stages carried the imprint of Jesus' church both in its essential nature and basic design" (2004, p.68).

Beckham (2004, pp.68ff) provides the **biblical evidence** for this birthing process of the church:

- A. Jesus' three and a half years of ministry were well known to the early Christians as well as the first century world – see Acts 26:26 (1700 years of experiencing

church in large groups in buildings have largely blinded the traditional church to the small group community life found in the NT). The church in the Gospels is a mobile experience centred around Christ as He modelled His church on the road (2004, p.68).

- B. Christ institutes the church, the Spirit constitutes it. Stott (cited in 2004, p.70) sums it up: “Thus Jesus ministry on earth, exercised personally and publicly, was followed by his ministry from heaven, exercised through His Holy Spirit by His apostles.” (community in the homes was the Pentecost miracle most often neglected in the 20th century: 2004, p.70)
- C. The Pentecost converts began the same kind of church, in their own cities that they had experienced in Jerusalem, following the basic principles, experiences and design (2004, p.71).
- D. The earliest church planters resorted to their two common church sources, viz. what they saw Jesus doing during His ministry when the church formed around Him (Jesus and His disciples living in community), and what they saw happened in Jerusalem when the church re-formed at Pentecost around the Holy Spirit (these church planters lived and preached community with/in Christ) (2004, pp.72-73).
- E. Paul did not begin in a vacuum but was linked to the kind of church and church planting that preceded him: Allen (cited in 2004, p.73) wrote, “St. Paul’s missionary method was not peculiarly St. Paul’s, he was not the only missionary who went about establishing churches in those early days.”
Paul is linked to Jesus and His type of church through his two primary mentors, Ananias and Barnabas (via his mother and John Mark), who both knew and understood first-hand Jesus’ community approach (2004, p.74).

As Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.153-154): many may be content with the classical model of church and its implications for ministry and mission, but for themselves and many others there are serious issues of vital, strategic importance involved when it comes to experimenting with new forms of ‘Jesus communities’ and incarnational-contextualised

mission. It is worth asking about the way Jesus developed disciples during his ministry and then considering to what extent the contemporary church has mirrored this.

Simson (2006, p.69) comments,

”The entire life of Jesus was one big revelation of the concepts laid out as foundations for his disciples to carry on. Speaking in parables, healing, driving out demons, prophesying, carrying a purse, a common financial fund, very carefully and prayerfully selecting disciples, eating and staying in other people’s houses, the concept of houses of peace (see Lk. 10), selecting twelve, later sending 70, sending them out to do the same: what was Jesus doing? He was laying out the ‘details of the plan’ for his disciples... revealing the blueprint for the *ekklesia* of God... He did not give them a book or a map, but his life and ministry was the blueprint, was the map, and so he told them: ‘Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you’ (Mt. 28:20). Not only did Jesus say to his disciples, ‘As the Father has sent me, I am sending you,’ but he had given them a detailed example, a pattern to follow, and a clear understanding of what being and building the ‘church’ means.”

Gehring (2004, p.19), in his research on ‘house church and mission,’¹⁰⁴ mentions our general neglect of Jesus’ and the gospels’ example and teaching with regard to discipleship and the NT church in embryo form (house church format). In fact he deals with this under two major headings (2004, pp.28ff):

a) Jesus’ Pre-Easter Use of Houses:

- For example His use of Peter’s house in Capernaum, as recorded in Mark’s Gospel (Mk. 1:29, 33; 2:1; 3:20; 9:33). After Nazareth, this was Jesus’ preferred abode and missionary base (2004:36). It was used for

¹⁰⁴ Lest we under-estimate the scholarship of Gehring’s research, we note that he obtained his PhD on ‘House Church and Mission’ at Tübingen University under the renowned Dr. Peter Stühlmacher, and has served on staff at Arizona State University, the Free University in Berlin and Justus Liebig University in Giessen, Germany. He is currently Adjunct Professor at George Fox Evangelical Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

assembly, instruction, healing, as well as a missionary base (house-to-house, village-to-village) for the surrounding area of Capernaum, Chorazin, Bethsaida, etc. Thus even at this early stage we had an established, pre-Easter 'church' in Capernaum (2004, p.42).

- His base for ministry and mission in Bethany, in the home of Mary and Martha. These 'house communities' in Capernaum and Bethany served as foundation for the primitive church as described in Acts (2004, pp.46-47).

b) The Disciples' Pre-Easter Use of Houses:

- As detailed in Luke 10, Jesus engaged the disciples in house-to-house ministry, using homes (which had opened their doors to them) as fixed quarters and as missions base: they were to go out in pairs (for the sake of credibility), from house-to-house and village-to-village, after Jesus' own format. A good example here would be the house of Zacchaeus (Lk.19:1-10) (2004, pp.49-59).

4.2.

The Acts of the Apostles and the POST-EASTER USE OF HOUSE CHURCHES, in the Jerusalem church and beyond.

4.2.1.

A fresh look at Acts for ecclesiological purposes - some essential pointers re the Book of Acts and the early church...

4.2.1.1.

No one can deny the fascination of God's church over the ages with NT church as depicted in Acts, i.e. the 'roots' of the church:

Latourette (1953, pp.65ff), in his classic Church history, details the 'amazing sweep of Christianity across the Graeco-Roman world in those early days. He (1953, p.105) goes on to analyse the reasons for 'the Phenomenal Spread of Christianity': its inclusivity,

flexibility, constancy (even under martyrdom), immortality in the risen Christ, life as a community of worship and mutual care, etc. “Whence came these qualities which won for Christianity its astounding victory? Careful and honest investigation can give but one answer, **Jesus**“ [my emphasis]italics) (1953, p.107)

Dulles (1987, p.222) said that the external mission of the Church can never be separated from its inner life. In the early centuries, the Church expanded not so much because of concerted missionary efforts as through its power of attraction as a contrast society. “Seeing the mutual love and support of Christians, and the high moral standards they observed, the pagans sought entrance into the Church. If the same is not happening today, this is largely because the Church no longer appears conspicuously as the community of the disciples, transformed by its participation in the new creation” (1987, p.222).

Writing on some of the reasons for the Church’s growth over the past 2000 years, Watson (1978, pp.22-23) had this to say:

“Every significant renewal by the Spirit of God **has brought back to the church something lost since the days of the early church** [my emphasis]. Yet these renewals have often been preceded by times of particular crisis, causing an urgent **return to the essentials of the faith or to some particular aspects which have been long neglected** [my emphasis]... Clearly the New Testament church became the basis for all future developments... Nevertheless, all look back to the first century for the basis of the belief and pattern of growth. Unquestionably one of the great appeals of the early church was the simplicity of the life-style marked by the disciples. They were known for their love, even towards those who bitterly persecuted them. There were characterised by infectious joy and praise... they never ceased to show generosity towards the poor and afflicted...”

Then, commenting on tomorrow’s church, Watson (1978, pp.37-38) adds,

“What is ... clear is that the old order of the established and organised church, relying on its structures and traditions instead of the renewing of the Spirit of God, will never satisfy those who in their own different ways are searching for the living God. If, however, the church **is able to rediscover its identity** [my emphasis], as originally given by God in the Scriptures... we could be in the most exciting and most exhilarating time in the history of the church that has ever been.”

4.2.1.2.

According to African scholar Kisau (2006, p.1297), **Acts describes some of the earliest events in the Christian church, filling the gap between the GOSPELS and the OTHER BOOKS OF THE NT.** Luke associates what Jesus had begun to do, as recorded in the Gospels, during His earthly ministry, with what He continues to do after the ascension, thus indicating that the ministry of Jesus was the beginning of the Christianity portrayed in the rest of the New Testament.

Says Kisau (2006, p.1297), traditionally the **authorship of Acts is assigned to Luke, the beloved physician.** He was a companion of Paul (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11), a requirement for writing the ‘we’ passages, where the author includes himself in the narrative (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-28:31). Whoever wrote Acts was also the author of the Gospel according to Luke, for the prefaces of both books refer to someone named Theophilus (Lk.1:1-4; Acts 1:1). The preface of Acts also refers to an earlier narrative (1:1).

“These days, scholars regard these two books as comprising **a two-part work, and hence they are often referred to as Luke-Acts** [my emphasis]. Study of the geographical and historical details in Acts that can be checked against other sources has shown that Luke was a very careful historian. It seems likely that Acts was not written to promote Paul’s views (as some scholars have argued in the past) but to provide information about what Luke considered to be “the most significant events in the early days of the church. His interpretation of what was significant was influenced by his theology, and thus in reading Acts we need to focus on both historical and

theological questions” (2006, p.1297). In terms of its historical context, Acts can be seen as a defence of the Christian faith to the Roman authorities or as an attempt to mediate between Judaism and Christianity, explaining why the Jewish leaders were continuing to reject the gospel message. Acts also has an evangelistic purpose, freeing the gospel from ties to Judaism and announcing its spread to all of the known world. “

In terms of its **theology** (2006, p.1297), Acts gives guidance to the church on how to live until Jesus comes again and on how to transmit the gospel to people who has never seen Jesus in the flesh. It explicitly describes the plan of salvation, the proof of prophecy and the fulfilment of God’s promises, all of which were **implicit in the gospels** [my emphasis]. This presentation could not only be used to explain the significance of Christ’s death to unbelievers, but would also encourage and strengthen the church by showing them that God was still acting in history. Luke has sometimes been accused of papering over the divisions in the earliest community because he does not mention the types of problems recorded in Paul’s Epistles to churches like those in Corinth and Galatia. However, his aim may not been to hide problems but rather to **model what the community of believers ought to be like when functioning at its best** [my emphasis].

As already pointed out, one of the major themes in Acts is inclusiveness - the community of believers transcends all racial, regional and social barriers. The church should not be divided along the lines of race, region or social class. The African continent, for example, of which we are a key part, “entered the twenty-first century ravaged by wars both large and small. It knows far too much of hate and disharmony. The church in Africa needs to be challenged by the inclusiveness of the earliest community of believers to provide an alternate model“ (2006, p.1297).

Varickasseril (2005, pp.40-41), commenting on the Lukan portrait of the early church in Acts, **emphasises its value for both ecclesiology and theology.**¹⁰⁵ Luke is no arm-

¹⁰⁵ **Stott** (1991, p.29) has a helpful section on ‘Luke the theologian-evangelist.’ In this section he challenges the redaction criticism proponents Dibelius, Conzelmann, etc, who believed that Luke pursued

chair theologian but one closely associated with the growth of the early church, as is evidenced in the many 'we' passages in Acts.

His three major summaries of church life (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16) are a stylistic device and literary genre which portray prominent characteristics and features of church, offer a panoramic view of early Christian community, relate repeated and customary occurrences, and give us a 'typical glimpse' into the life of community in its earliest and most productive stages.

Varickasseril cites Kümmel (2005, pp.41-42) as being of the opinion that the picture portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles is *not* the result of a conscious idealization. The narratives are reliable, with Luke inviting his readers to look into the future with confidence by reflecting on the origins of Christianity.

Kesich (1999, pp.4-9) in his *The Church Before Paul* makes the point that Acts is still the indispensable source for the earliest Christian church in Jerusalem and beyond. Luke's main purpose is to present the origins of the Christian community and its expansion. He **brings theology and history together**, he is reliable as historical source and conveys the very atmosphere in which the earliest Christians lived and worked. This would include Christ's sonship and lordship, a resurrection and *parousia* Christology, the diversity of the early church, the reasons for its dramatic expansion, etc (1999, pp.29ff).

Kesich (1999, p.36) summarises as follows,

“The openness of the Twelve to the spirit of Jesus and to the needs of the community was certainly the most decisive factor in achieving so much in so little time. As leaders, they represented the historical link between the *pre*-resurrection and the *post*-resurrection periods (my emphasis), between the historical and the risen Jesus... Led by the spirit of the Risen Christ, the earliest community witnessed that the crucified Jesus and the risen Lord are

his theological concerns at the expense of his historicity. Stott also advances I.H. Marshall's work in support of the fact that Luke was both historian and theologian. In particular he was a historian and theologian of 'salvation,' which has been prepared by God, bestowed by Christ and offered to **all** peoples!

one and the same. It developed and opened itself to the needs of its own people as well as to the world.”

Gehring (2004, pp.76-78) deals quite intensively with our subject of the Acts summaries – he suggests that in his presentation in the Book of Acts, **Luke has often been accused of projecting his own ideal image of the church back into the early Christian community in Jerusalem, particularly in his summaries.** While it cannot be contested that Luke viewed the primitive church in Jerusalem as an example for his own congregation, **there is no reason to conclude that his portrayal is historically misleading.** Regarding Acts 2:42, Gehring cites Barrett (in 2004, p.76),

“In this verse Luke gives an idealized picture of the earliest church – idealized but not for that reason misleading. That it is not misleading appears at once if negatives are inserted: they ignored the teaching of the apostles, neglected the fellowship, never met to take a meal together, and did not say their prayers. This would be nonsense. The idealising is in the participle *proskartenountes* (‘continuing faithfully,’ ‘remaining constant’), and that Luke did not intend it to be understood as unmarked by exceptions is shown by his story of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11). There is no ground for doubting the outline of Luke’s account; if he had not given it we should doubtless have conjectured something of the kind.”

[For an argument against Luke’s supposed projection of Hellenistic utopian ideas back into the primitive church by his use of terms like *koinonia* and *koinos*, we may refer to Gehring, 2004, p.77].

4.2.1.2.

The writer’s **conclusion? A careful study of Acts is basic and essential in formulating our ecclesiology and missiology.**

4.3.

THE THREE MAJOR SUMMARIES IN ACTS OF THE EARLIEST LIFE OF THE NT CHURCH, PLUS A PICTURE OF THE MISSIONAL ANTIOCHIAN CHURCH IN ACTS 13:1-3, IN ORDER TO SHOW THE SOLID FOUNDATION OF THE NT HOUSE CHURCH IN SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY.

4.3.1.

FIRST MAJOR SUMMARY, ACTS 2:42-47.

With the outpouring of the Spirit and His gifts on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the commission of the risen Lord to His followers to bear witness to Him (Lk.24:44-49; Acts 1:8) begins to be actualized. The faith was carried forward (the enthusiastic community having grown to well over 3000 people, needing to be organized in some measure) in four ways, **ACCORDING TO ACTS 2:42:**

(a) commitment to the apostles' teaching, (b) the fellowship, (c) the breaking of bread and (d) the prayers – SURELY THE BASIC FOUNDATION STONES OF THE CHURCH.

It is important to note here that the exegetical material following cannot be separated from the house church format of the early church, throughout history and even today. While some may object that, for example (a) to (d) is practised in models other than the house church [the writer does not like the term 'model' in any case, as if there is a perfect blueprint for church which needs only to be followed in detail in order to be successful], (a) to (d) come to fullest expression within the life of the house church as practised in the NT as well as in many parts of the world today. To be specific – the experience of the apostles' teaching, is that traditional pulpit-to-pew monologue (alone) or house church dialogue, with the participation of believer-priests as well as those spiritually-gifted to teach (Eph. 4:11)? As to the experience of fellowship, can *koinonia* (as understood by the NT church and others like Bonhoeffer in his *Life Together* and the Chinese house church movement) fully be experienced and practised in traditional/institutional churches as we know them?

Commenting on **Acts 2:41ff**, Blaiklock (1967, p.61) says, “In this picture of the early Church note... ‘This was no loose group, but a clear-cut society, universal in membership, but with definite firm standards...’”, including repentance, confession and baptism, a recognition of the authority of the apostles, the keynote being ‘fellowship,’ and the ‘love feast’ which included the Lord’s Supper.

Larkin (1995, pp.60ff) comments that Luke in Acts 2:42 uses present and imperfect tenses, even periphrastics, to emphasise the continuous nature of the occurrence or practice. He cites Bengel (in 1995, p.60), the 19th century pietist Bible commentator, as concluding his commentary on Acts this way: “Thou hast, O church, thy form. It is thine to preserve it, and guard thy trust.”

To this Larkin adds, “We must do this by examining Luke’s portrait of a Spirit-filled community.”

According to Varickasseril (2005, pp.42-43), “**devoted themselves**” (Acts 2:42) carries with it the idea of ‘perseverance,’ and consequently these four traits are to be the regular and continuous practice of the church. [he cites Bruce (in 2005, pp.42-43) as making the point that the breaking of bread and the prayers were also expressions of the fellowship that reigned in the early community. To this we could add the respect manifested in the fidelity to the teachings of the apostles. It is the love of God and neighbour that binds these four features of church life together].

Marshall (1984, p.83) refers to these four elements in Acts 2:42 as not being separate but together characterising a Christian gathering in the early church: “Here are the four essential elements in the religious practice of the Christian church” (1984, p.83).

Stott (1991, p.81) describes Luke’s account in Acts 2:42-47 as (1991, p.81) ‘a beautiful *cameo* [my italics] of the Spirit-filled church.’ Stott follows this up immediately with the statement [the writer’s basic argument] (1991, p.81),

“Of course the church did not begin that day, and it is **incorrect to call the Day of Pentecost ‘the birthday of the church.’ For the church as the**

people of God goes back at least 4,000 years [my emphasis] ¹⁰⁶ What happened at Pentecost was that the remnant of God's people became the Spirit-filled body of Christ."

Luke then, in Acts 2:42-46, provides the evidence of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the midst of God's church.

4.3.1.1.

The believers devoted themselves to "THE TEACHING OF THE APOSTLES."

Returning to Varickasseril (2005, p.43), devoting themselves to the "teaching of the apostles" in Acts 2:42 implied that the early community gave themselves to a serious study of the scriptures, i.e. the OT, as it found its fulfilment in the Christ. Note, for example, Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost and his references to the psalms and prophets. The apostles' teaching probably also included an account of Jesus' life and ministry, His ethical and practical teachings, warnings about persecution and false teaching, etc. At its centre lay the good news of Jesus Christ.

Stott (1991, p.82) says that the early church was essentially a learning church, opened by the Spirit, taught by the apostles whom Jesus had appointed, with 3,000 pupils in the kindergarten. He affirms that anti-intellectualism and the fullness of the Spirit are incompatible, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. A Spirit-filled church is a NT church in the sense that it studies and submits to NT instruction [a huge emphasis in the house church – personal comment].

The believers devoted themselves to "THE FELLOWSHIP."

¹⁰⁶ The writer does not believe that this statement mitigates against the house church thesis. We are speaking here of God's people as the 'people of God' – is there any form of church which gives better expression to the *laos* of God and the priesthood of all believers than the house church format as defined in this dissertation? Certainly today's traditional/institutional church does not compare.

'Fellowship' implies the mutual, fraternal demands made on the followers as those who shared a common faith and Lord.

Schattenmann (1979, pp.639-644) has a helpful word-study on 'fellowship,' i.e. *koinonia*. The literal meaning is that of association, communion, fellowship, participation. In the Greek and Hellenistic world *koinonia* referred to the evident, unbroken fellowship between the gods and men. It also denoted the close union and brotherly bond between men. It was taken up by the philosophers to denote the ideal to be sought. While Plato and others tied *koinonia* to a shining primeval period, the NT didn't look backwards but forwards – i.e. the new age must break into the present, lost world.

Schattenmann (1979, pp.639-644) continues on *koinonia*:

- Fellowship in the *OT*. In the primeval history of Genesis, the rupture of fellowship with God was followed by the loss of unity among men. But God's activity in forgiving, saving and preserving did not cease. Instead it found new ways (Gen. 8:212ff; 12:3). Abraham, and after him the people of Israel, stood in a saving relationship to Yahweh, the goal of which was to bridge the gulf between God and man. God dealt with Israel as a community and fulfilled His promises to her. The role of the community in the ultimate, universal picture of salvation (Gen.1:23; Is. 48:6) plays a large part in the *OT*.
- Fellowship in the *NT*. While typically a Pauline term, the use of *koinos* and *koinonia* in Acts 2 and in general in Luke's picture of the primitive church requires special attention – it means sharing, participation and companionship. Specifically the *koinonia* in Acts 2:42 can be taken in an absolute sense as an essential part of the life of worship. While it could be translated "communion" or "liturgical fellowship in worship," *koinonia* expresses something new and independent. It denotes the unanimity and unity brought about by the Spirit. The individual was completely upheld by the community. In Acts 4:32ff we have a picture of the communal sharing of goods in the house churches. This was the expression of an enthusiastic love. It presupposed the continuance of private earning and the

voluntary character of sacrifice and giving to the needy. There is no hint of either communal production or communal consumption. It was not organized, and not to be seen in economic categories. It rose out of the un-trammelled freedom from care that Jesus preached... it is to be seen as the continuance of the common life that Jesus led with His disciples (Lk. 8:1-3; Jn. 12:4ff, 13:29). This *koinonia* led to practical caring, as evidenced in Paul's collections brought to Jerusalem as a tangible expression of fellowship in the churches.

Stott (1991, p.83) reminds us that *koinonia* "is a Trinitarian experience; it is our common share in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But secondly, *koinonia* also expresses what we share out together, what we give as well as what we receive. *Koinonia* is the word Paul used for the collection he was organizing among the Greek churches, and *koinonikos* is the Greek word for 'generous.'" [We can rightly ask again, do we see anything like the above in most institutional/traditional churches? One certainly does in house churches].

The believers devoted themselves (Acts 2:42) to THE BREAKING OF BREAD.

Table fellowship was for Luke 'the litmus test for transactions across social hierarchies and ethnic boundaries,' it was indeed a true sign of authentic friendship and the meals became ways of experiencing and enjoying God's presence and providential care. Through them the participants were demonstrating and celebrating their new kinship in Jesus' family. Thus partaking of food was a significant feature of Christian community [thus the contemporary house church].

Bruce (1965, p.100) asks, is the reference here

"to the Eucharist, to an Agape, to an ordinary meal? Perhaps all three, if we are to gather from verse 46 that they took the principal meal of the day in each other's houses, observing the Lord's Supper each time they did so."

Moltmann (1978, pp.64ff,106ff) writes about the 'feast of freedom,' for it is the feast of resurrection, a feast with the Resurrected One. ^{107 108}

The believers devoted themselves (Acts 2:42) to “THE PRAYERS.”

Stott (1991, pp.84-85) points out that the early Church was a 'worshipping church.' It took part in prayer services or meetings (not only in private prayer). They continued for a while in the temple prayer services, but immediately began to supplement these with more informal and spontaneous meetings in their homes which included corporate prayer. Such prayer was carried out with 'glad (*agalliasis*, lit. 'exultation') and sincere hearts' (v. 46). [Stott adds that joy, the fruit of the Spirit, is "sometimes a more uninhibited joy than is customary (or even acceptable) within the staid traditions of historic churches" - at the same time their joy was never irreverent, bearing in mind verse 43, 'Everyone was filled with awe.']

Certainly the NT church was a 'praying community' as is abundantly illustrated throughout the whole Book of Acts.

Acts 2:47b, “THE LORD ADDS TO THEIR NUMBER DAILY THOSE WHO WERE BEING SAVED.”

According to Stott (1991, pp.86-87), the early Church was an **EVANGELISTIC CHURCH**, in a more biblical sense than perhaps we believe and practice today.

¹⁰⁷ According to Küng (1986, p.218), the eucharist was first celebrated as 'mass' about 550 AD.

¹⁰⁸ Brother Yun (2003, pp.1ff), one of the major Chinese house church network leaders, calls this kind of NT Christianity 'a viable Christianity,' operating at grassroots level and impacting towns and cities and counties. He estimates that operating in this way the Chinese house church movement had some 58 million members in 2003, growing at a rate of 30,000 members per day, equating to some 80-100 million in 2008/9 (according to the writer's calculations – this estimate is confirmed by most experts on the Chinese house church today). On p.13 Yun indicates a figure of 80-100 million Protestants (confirmed by Paul Hattaway's research – 2003, p.149) and 12 million Roman Catholics in regular churches and house churches. The growth rate of the house church movement is estimated as being between 12.5 and 17.5% p.a. (p. 2). To quote Yun (2003, p.67), "Normal Christianity for a believer is surely when we live *according to the patterns of the church laid out* [my italics] in the word of God. The church in the Book of Acts did not have remarkable experiences and success, they had what should be normal lives and experiences for any church that claims to have been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus! Much of the church today, including in China, is abnormal and unbiblical."

- **The Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit**, and Acts is governed by one dominant, overriding and all-controlling motif, viz. the expansion of the faith through missionary witness. Those first Jerusalem Christians were not so preoccupied with learning, sharing and worshiping that they forgot about witnessing (1991, p.86).
- While doubtless God accomplished His mission through the apostles' preaching, the witness of church members, the impressive love of their common life, and their example, we must emphasise that it was **God** Who did it. For He is the Head of the Church. (While we must harness all we have today, including all the technology God has given us, we must evangelise in humble dependence on Him as the principal Evangelist)
- **'Being saved' is a process:** "those who were *being saved*" is derived from the present participle *sozomenous*, emphasising that salvation is a progressive experience, culminating in final glorification.
- **Salvation and church commitment belong together.** There is neither nominal nor solitary Christianity in the Book of Acts (1991, p.87).
- **Evangelism was a continuing process** (1991, p.87). There was always the expectation of steady and uninterrupted church growth [this is very much so in today's house church movement, supremely in China].

4.3.2.

SECOND MAJOR SUMMARY, ACTS 4:32-35.

The first feature Luke presents here is, according to Varickasseril (2005, pp.46ff) the **UNITY OF HEART AND SOUL** (an expression indicating a true and perfect friendship) that existed in the early community, despite the negative reactions of the religious authorities to healings, etc. Everything was shared in common. There could be no true friendship without sharing.

Secondly (Varickasseril, 2005, p.47), the apostles continued to **GIVE TESTIMONY TO THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST** - i.e. the early community understood *witness* as courageous and fearless testimony to the good news (Stott, 1991, p.106) points to the apostles' ignoring of the Sanhedrin's ban and their bold and powerful witnessing – see also Acts 4:33). Grace was on them all – *charis* carried nuances of graciousness, attractiveness, favour, good will, gracious help, gratitude, etc.

Thirdly (Varickasseril, 2005, p.47), the community was characterised by **SOLIDARITY**. There was no needy person in their midst (see Dt. 15:4-11, where Israel was commanded to care for the poor) (see Luke in his gospel account where he emphasizes the importance of generous giving at all times: Lk. 6:38; 12:13-21; 12:33-34; 16:1-9).¹⁰⁹ [Stott quotes Calvin (cited in 1991, p.107) to the effect, “We must have hearts harder than iron if we are not moved by the reading of this narrative. In those days the believers gave abundantly of what was their own; we in our day are content not just jealously to retain what we possess, but callously to rob others... They sold their own possessions in those days; in our day it is the lust to purchase that reigns supreme. At that time love made each man's own possessions common property for those in need; in our day such is the inhumanity of many, that they begrudge to the poor a common dwelling upon earth, the common use of water, air and sky”].

[Cullmann (1956, p.204), writing on the early church, points out that “The sharing of possessions, to which the Acts of the Apostles refers, is a typical example of Christian community. It is not the deliberate creation of a new social framework. It does not involve any social organisation or general obligations. That is quite clear from the account given in Acts 4 and 5. It is a **spontaneous creation of the Holy Spirit within the Church**” (my italics)]

¹⁰⁹ See Stott (1991, p.83) for an excellent little exposition of Acts 2's record of the church's sharing of possessions. He contrasts the NT practice with the legalism of the Essenes of the Qumran community. He also points out that the 16th century Anabaptists who used the NT model did not see the sharing of goods as compulsory – the Hutterite Brethren in Moravia seemed to be the only exception, for they made complete common ownership a condition of membership. Menno Simons, e.g, pointed out that the Jerusalem experiment was neither universal nor permanent, and wrote ‘we... have never taught or practised community of goods.’ Even in Jerusalem, the sharing of property and possession was voluntary.

[The writer witnesses all the time this kind/level of 'community' in the house church, especially in these perilous economic times, job-losses, etc].

Fourthly, according to Varickasseril (2005, p.47), **THE APOSTLES PLAYED A VITAL ROLE IN THE LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY** – e.g. those who sold things placed the proceeds at the apostles' feet.

4.3.3.

THIRD MAJOR SUMMARY, ACTS 5:12-16

After the positive example of Barnabas's sharing of his possessions and the negative one of Annanias and Sapphira's selfishness, Luke goes on to underline **the church's community-life** once more (Varickasseril, 2005, pp.48ff).

Anderson quotes Brunner (cited in 2006, p.162), "The Spirit produces and exists in *koinonia* (fellowship in the body) but perishes in an institution."

Newbigin (1964, p.90), on the Church as *koinonia* of the Spirit writes, "The Church is, in the most exact sense, a *koinonia*,' a common sharing in the Holy Spirit... In very truth it is the presence of the Holy Spirit that constitutes the Church."¹¹⁰

The **healing ministry** had primacy of place in the community (Varickasseril, 2005, p.49). The church demonstrated Yahweh as healer (Ex. 15:26) (note Jesus' healing ministry during his public life - this projected the face of Yahweh the healer). For Luke, *therapeuo* is an important word as it occurs about 19 times in his writings (see Lk. 9:1, 10:9, etc:

¹¹⁰ Newbigin (1964, pp.90ff) gives a helpful summary of the immense mass of biblical material on this indissoluble connection between the Holy Spirit and the Church. On pp.106ff Newbigin says that in the institutional church there is very little reference (even in Lambeth) to the church in its congregational life, *fellowship* and discipline. Newbigin supported those who in his day expressed concern about "certain kinds of supra-congregational organisation which have the effect of distorting the real character of the Church's life... most clearly seen in the life of worship, witness, mutual love and service, and prayer of a Christian congregation. It is certain that the New Testament gives us no warrant for imposing such an organisation upon the life of the local church... Reunion has in itself nothing to do with the size of ecclesiastical units. It has to do with the recovery of the true nature and quality of the Church's life as the visible fellowship of all who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus."

Jesus had given the power to heal to the twelve sent on mission, so also the seventy two; the apostles exercised a healing ministry on a large scale). Thus Luke affirms in his narrative the conception of miracles among his contemporaries, especially that of healing and deliverance from the demonic.

Stott (1991, p.113) highlights that the people's actions here, i.e. with regard to Peter's shadow falling on the sick, may appear superstitious at first sight, but that he sees no reason to condemn it as tantamount to belief in magic...

“No, the people had been deeply impressed by the words and works of Peter, had recognized him as a man of God and an apostle of Christ, and believed that through close proximity to him they could be healed. It may be significant that the verb *episkiazo*, which Luke chooses, meaning to ‘overshadow,’ he has used twice in his Gospel of the overshadowing of God's presence” (Lk. 1:35; 9:34).

The healing ministry is a strong component in contemporary house church practice, much more so than in the traditional/institutional church.

4.3.4.

A SUMMARY OF THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH, ACTS 13:1-4¹¹¹

Bruce (1984, p.55) depicts **the church at Antioch becoming a missionary base** for reaching the Gentile world via the routes to the West. The leaders included some interesting people: ‘prophets and teachers,’ Simeon Niger (perhaps Simon of Cyrene: Lk. 23:26 – if so, he was not the only Cyrenean among the leaders in Antioch, for Lucius is mentioned as another) (we recall that it was men from Cyprus and Cyrene who started Gentile evangelisation in Antioch, according to Acts 11:20), Manaen (possibly a boyhood companion of Herod the tetrarch of whom we read in Lk. 3:19,20; 23:7-12), and of course Barnabas and Paul. The Spirit's direction to mission was probably given through the lips of one of the prophets in the church. The message was clear: two of

¹¹¹ It was not for nothing that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’ in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

their best leaders, Paul and Barnabas, were to be released by the congregation for service further afield. This was confirmed by their colleagues via the laying on of hands. Note that the whole church at Antioch was involved in the extended mission of Barnabas and Paul to the Gentile world, and it was the whole church they gave report to on their return (1965:253). These now went down to Seleucia Pieria, Antioch's port at the mouth of the Orontes, and set sail from there to Cyprus and beyond.¹¹²

Larkin (1995, p.189) reminds us that Acts 13:1-4 is part of the larger section, 13:1-21:16, i.e. "The Church in All Nations: Paul's Missionary Journeys." The Jerusalem church had faithfully carried the gospel across many cultural thresholds as witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria (Acts 1:8). Through Paul it would embark on fulfilling the 'to the ends of the earth' phase of the Great Commission (9:15-16; 13:2). What we find here in Luke's account in Acts 13 is this next phase of

"an effectively contextualised message for increasingly diverse audiences (13:16-41; 14:15-17; 17:22-31); a mission progressively triumphant, even over the forces of darkness (13:8-12; 14:8-20; 16:16-18; 19:11-20; 13:45-52; 14:19-20; 16:16-40; 19:21-40); a church spiritually united though ethnically diverse (15:1-35); and a movement innocent before the state" (16:35-40; 18:12-17; 19:37-40).

Larkin (1995, pp.189-190) states that the first missionary journey (13:1-14:28) "presents in microcosm all the main features of Paul's missionary call" (1995, pp.189-190).

Larkin sees **three main principles in the church's commissioning of Paul and Barnabas** [remember that the Antioch church was a network of house churches]:

- That of *church leaders as missionary candidates* (13:1) (1995, p.190): note in this list of leaders their spiritual giftedness, multicultural and

¹¹² Bruce (1965, p.252), referring to the word 'worshipping' in verse 2, points out that this verb was used in Attic Greek of performing an unpaid public service, e.g. helping to equip naval units or training choruses (dancing choirs) for the state festivals. In the NT it is used of service in the Christian community in a much wider sense than that represented by the later ecclesiastical use of 'liturgy.'

socio-economic diversity and their apostolic function of cross-cultural pioneer church planting among unreached peoples.

- That of *the Spirit's direction of missionary development* (13:2) (1995, pp.190-191): it seems all the leaders engaged in worship and fasting, making themselves more receptive to commands from heaven (Ex. 34:28; Lk. 2:37). As indicated, through those with prophetic gifting, the Spirit indicated to the leadership that it was now time for deployment of workers for the evangelisation of Jew and Gentile. God sends the missionary through a complementary inward call and outward confirmation through the church.
- That of *the church releasing the missionary* (13:3) (1995, pp.191-192): the church is the key to the timing. There is apparently no testing of Saul's and Barnabas's suitability as they had already proved themselves in the congregation. Their release is marked by prayer, fasting and the laying on of hands – all for their equipping by the Spirit. Luke is silent regarding the church's financial responsibility for these missionaries.

Stott (1991, pp.216-217), with regard to the **'they' who were worshipping, states that this probably included** not only the five named leaders in the Antioch church but **also the church members as a whole** (see also Acts 6:2-6) – moreover, when Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey, 'they gathered the church together' (they reported to the church because they had been commissioned by the church).

Stott (1991, p.218) warns against two dangers today in the context of 13:1-4:

- The tendency to individualism, by which a Christian claims direct spiritual guidance without any reference to the church.
- The tendency to institutionalism, by which all decision-making is done by the church without any reference to the Spirit.

4.4.

CONCLUSIONS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE 'THE MAJOR ACTS SUMMARIES' AND ACTS 13:1-3 FOR THE CHURCH TODAY...

4.4.1.

Snyder (1996, pp.119ff) summarises the functions of Acts 2, 4, etc. under the words *leitourgia, koinonia and martyrion*. He writes (2004, pp.89ff) about **the early church's priority of community**, seeing it as the key to church life and natural evangelism. Furthermore (2004, p.126), he sees the church as only prophetic when it creates communities that visibly transcend the divisions in society that result from racism, economic or social marginalization, or other forms of injustice and oppression.

4.4.2.

R and J Banks (1998, p.47) warn against **the danger of sidelining the first Christians and the early church**. Dunn wrote (cited in Banks, 1998, p.47) on the distinctive character of early Christian meetings when compared to those of other first-century Christian groups:

“It did not meet on consecrated or special premises; its context was the home of one of its members... its *raison d'être* was rather the sharing of the shared grace (*charis*) of God in its particular expressions (*charismata*). It was not characterized by an established pattern or liturgy [the writer would not totally concur with Dunn here – see Acts 2:42] nor did it depend on an official leadership to give it direction; rather it was to be expected that the Spirit would exercise sufficient control through the interplay of gifts and ministries ordered by him. Its aim was to bring about the *mutual edification of all through being together and through a doing for one another in word and action as the body of Christ in mutual interdependence on the Spirit*” [my emphasis].

As such the early church/house church remains a challenge and inspiration to any group that meets today as the body of Christ.

4.4.3.

In the context of the early church's devotion to the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42), **how does the modern 'sermon' (in the traditional setting relate to the early church practice of preaching and teaching?**

Simson (1998, pp.83ff) reminds us that in Hebrew culture, the traditional teacher was the father teaching his family in his house, usually at meal times. Teaching traditionally is geared to show someone how to do something, and to explain why things are the way they are. The real goal of teaching is not merely increasing knowledge, but helping people to obey and serve God and His purposes (Rom. 1:5). Such kind of teaching took place, it would appear, via the elders of house churches (1 Tim. 3:1-7), together with charismatically-gifted teachers (Eph. 4:11), either residential or visiting, or visiting apostles teaching from 'house to house' (Acts 20:20). The subject of teaching is 'the Word,' God's story, the Bible, what God has chosen to reveal of Himself, ourselves, the history of the world, and the way to live, so we can fit our story into His-story. The original teaching 'system' was **relational**, geared to mature a disciple in Christ through a spirit of quick obedience (Mt. 28:20). The Greek word often translated 'preaching' in the NT (besides *kerusso*) is *dialogizomai*, which means to have a dialogue between people. When Paul 'preached for a long time' in Ephesus (Acts 20:7), it was not an endless monologue but rather a time of questions and answers. This is very different to the accepted Western monologue style of preaching we have grown accustomed to over centuries.

Snyder (1996, pp.154-155) adds a practical point – Spirit-imparted *koinonia* makes study of the Scriptures come alive. *Koinonia* is not to be experimented with, but to be experienced. In this environment we teach [very difficult, if not impossible in anything but in a small group or house church – personal comment].

Frost and Hirsch (2003, p.151) are of the opinion that except for the preaching of outstanding communicators, modern sermons have little or no impact [e.g. how well do we remember the sermon preached two weeks ago in our congregation?] In any case,

they argue, the sermon's technique has been borrowed from ancient Greek and Roman philosophy rather than the Bible. "We invented the sermon, and then it reinvented us."

4.4.4.

The earlier and latter parts of Acts find much *confirmation in the epistles*, particularly those of the Apostle Paul in his letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Timothy and Titus [for in-depth descriptions of the house churches in Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, etc - see e.g. Birkey (1988, pp.41ff), etc) and Gehring (2004, pp.130-154)] Acts carefully details the use of homes in Pauline missional outreach, giving a literary and historical analysis of house church passages in chapters 16 and 18, also recounting Paul's dealings with cities with demonstrable house churches, viz. Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Cenchrea, Ephesus, Rome, Colosse and Laodicea.

4.5.

SPECIAL LESSONS FROM THE POST-EASTER USE OF HOUSE CHURCHES IN JERUSALEM AND BEYOND

Herewith a **more detailed picture of the post-Easter use of houses in the Jerusalem church and beyond**, according to Gehring (2004, pp.62-116).

4.5.1.

Gehring (2004, p.62) begins by pointing to **the contemporary neglect of the house church in the Book of Acts, when it is actually the key to understanding it.**

4.5.2.

Thinking of church in Jerusalem and its house church format, **we start with the so-called 'upper room,'** which was part of an ordinary house on the south-west hill-side of the more affluent part of the city, used as a base for the first disciples (2004, pp.65-70). [Gehring (2004, p.67) cites Riesner to the effect that there is a good case for a Jewish-Christian presence in Jerusalem "up until the fourth century, with only very short interruptions"]. Was it possibly James's house (brother of Jesus)? There were apparently two separate homes/groups used as gathering places for Jesus' followers

viz. the 'upper room' house, made up largely of Aramaic-speaking believers and then also the home of Mary (mother of Mark) (Acts 12:12), made up of Greek-speaking believers.

In any event, the everyday life of the Jerusalem house churches continued along the lines of Acts 2, and quickly spread in influence [Gehring (2004, p.88) mentions Jeremias's earlier estimate of Jerusalem's population at 25-30,000 – this has now given way to a more modern estimate of 60-120,000], the believers engaging mainly in **house-to-house outreach**, through essentially 3 modes: missional proclamation of the Good News; personal conversations; and attractive lifestyle (Gehring, 2004, pp.91-93).

4.5.3.

The post-Easter missional impact of the Jerusalem house churches.

The so-called seven, the **group of Hellenists formed around their most prominent member and leader, Stephen** (Acts 6:1-6), was of great significance in the missional history of the Christian movement from the earliest days (Gehring, 2004, p.105). Initially Stephen and his fellows engaged in a fairly organized outreach to the Hellenistic synagogues of Jerusalem. Stephen's confrontational and missional messages resulted in his angry audience stoning him to death, and thus his followers were driven out of Jerusalem (Acts 7:59-8:3). Ironically, as a result, the spread of the message beyond Jerusalem was significantly accelerated.

One of his followers, of course, was **Philip**, who carried the gospel beyond the previous boundaries of Judaism to the God-fearers and to **the Samaritans** (Acts 8:4-13, 26-40). The Palestinian coastal range with its predominantly coastal cities, such as Gaza (Acts 8:26), Ashdod, and Caesarea (Acts 8:40), played a central role in his mission. Although (Gehring, 2004, p.106) it cannot be documented with certainty, there seems to be some indication that Philip proceeded as an itinerant evangelist from house to house, following the approach Jesus took. It seems he strategically concentrated on a specific area by setting up residence in Caesarea, thence targeting the afore-mentioned cities in the surrounding countryside. Along with the house of Cornelius, this could have been a second house church in Caesarea, indicating a plurality of house churches there.

In addition to Caesarea, **Damascus** appears to have been another Hellenist centre, probably the result of Stephen's followers – otherwise Paul would not have wanted to persecute the Christians there. After his conversion Paul stayed in the house of Judas (Acts 9:11, 17). Paul was probably baptized and disciplined in his house during his few days' stay in Damascus. It seems there were a large number of believers and therefore house churches in Damascus, forming a sizeable congregation in that city (Gehring, 2004, pp.106-107).

Peter based himself in the city of **Joppa** in the house of Simon the Tanner (Acts 9:36-43). He also had contact with Cornelius's household in Caesarea.

Another result of the scattering of Stephen's followers was the **church-plant in Antioch**, which became a 'missions-hub' for the area and even Asia Minor. Barnabas and Paul (from Tarsus) used Antioch as their missions-base for their first missionary journey into Southern Asia Minor. They travelled as 'radical itinerants,' planting house churches along the way (Gehring, 2004, p.109).

Thus the link between the primitive Jerusalem church and the Pauline missional churches was *the house church missional model* (Gehring, 2004, pp.114-116). In a very real sense it is the story of the house church of Jesus in Capernaum, via the Hellenists, to the house churches of Paul which eventually spread across Asia Minor and Europe.

The Hellenists represented *the* connecting link between the primitive Jerusalem church and the Pauline mission congregations (Gehring, 2004 pp.113-114). They translated the Jesus tradition into the Greek language and conveyed it to the Greek-speaking population in Jerusalem, and far beyond, as we have seen. ¹¹³

¹¹³ Gehring (2004, p.114) gives a fascinating explanation as to why the Hellenists were such a key-factor in the spread of the gospel: some of them who had come from the Diaspora to Jerusalem were more flexible in their thinking and more open to new ideas and customs because of their experience abroad; they appeared to have oriented themselves quite closely to Jesus and His teachings and His unique proclamation; their early persecution forced them to leave their sedentary life in Jerusalem and take on a more itinerant existence; etc.

4.5.4.

Some conclusions re the post-Easter use of house churches – in Jerusalem and beyond (Gehring, 2004, pp.116-118):

- The *private domestic house served as the foundation for missional outreach and community* in the primitive church in Jerusalem, just as it did in the ministry of Jesus and His disciples. The ancient *oikos* served as a source for evangelistic contacts, with its built-in network of relationships reaching far beyond the immediate family to servants, friends, clientele, and businesses associated.
- An *organic transition* can be seen from the Jerusalem church to the mission church in Antioch. In both Jerusalem and in Antioch the first Christians met in homes. There is also evidence of a plurality of house churches in the various cities touched by the gospel.
- We will say more about this later, but *the training of leadership took place in these house churches*, as heads of households became house church leaders and later leaders of networks of house churches in a given city or area.

5. THE INFLUENCE OF THE JEWISH SYNAGOGUE ON THE EARLY CHURCH.

The question may be asked, **‘Was there not *another* church model prevalent in the early church, influenced by the synagogue and its worship?’**

5.1.

By way of Judaistic background, Ellison (1974, pp.552ff) has shown that the development of **the synagogue model within Judaism arose out of the two destructions of the Jerusalem temple in 586 BC and 70 AD**. Though Judaism recognized the existence of the righteous among the nations, a full knowledge and application of God’s will was confined to Jewry. The focus of the synagogue was very much on the *Torah*.

Feinberg (1962, p.1227-1228) defined the synagogue as essentially a place of meeting, a Jewish place of worship and common action (Lk. 12:11; 21:12). After the loss of the

temple it served as a sanctuary in miniature. It contained no altar – prayer and the reading of the *Torah* took the place of the sacrifice. It also served as a gathering place for counsel regarding community affairs and education. Subject to the law of the land, the synagogue had its own government, being led by elders empowered to exercise discipline and punish members (by scourging and excommunication). The chief officer was the “ruler of the synagogue” (Mk. 5:22; Acts 13:15, 18:8).

Pfeiffer (1960, p.509) points out, interestingly, that such gatherings doubtless first took place in private **homes** (Ezek. 8:1; 20:1-3). **Thus the jump from synagogue-building to private homes, as recorded in Acts, was a very natural one.**

5.2.

In a well-researched article Knowles (2010, pp.1-21) ¹¹⁴ states that **to grasp the organizational structure of the early church, we must examine the two institutions that had the greatest effect on it: (a) the Jewish home; (b) the Jewish synagogue.**

5.2.1.

The Jewish home...

In those early days, while much religious activity rotated around the temple and synagogue, the Jewish **home remained the most important centre of spiritual life.** Following the destruction of the temple in AD 70, the rôle of the home as a ‘small temple’ or ‘sanctuary’ (*miqdash me’at* – cf. Ezek. 11:16) became even more important. Marvin Wilson in his *Our Father Abraham* (cited in Knowles, 2010, p.1) stated,

“Foundational to all theory on the biblical concept of the family is the Jewish teaching that *the home is more important than the synagogue*... the Church has yet to grapple with this crucial concept.” ¹¹⁵

The priest in the family, the parent (*horeh*) provided teaching (*torah*), just as the priest expounded the *Torah* in the temple: Deuteronomy 6:6-9 illustrates the point (cf. Genesis 18:19, *For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after*

¹¹⁴ Knowles, B., 2010. *The Influence of the Home and the Synagogue on Early Church Structure*. Available at: www.godward.org [Accessed 18/03/2010].

¹¹⁵ Knowles cites Rabbi M.N. Kertzer’s book *What Is a Jew?* (Kertzer, n.d., p.64) to the effect, “Is it true that in Judaism the home is more important than the synagogue?: Yes, definitely... the center of Jewish religious life is the home.”

him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him). The ‘way of the LORD’ was passed on primarily through **family relationships and parental modelling**, not through synagogue [or church]. Whatever spiritual behaviour is learned in the home would be exported to the synagogue and the community [also to the church] – more so than *vice versa*. This makes sense, for the family is *the* major resource throughout the entire life-cycle, from birth to death.¹¹⁶ The Jewish home was also the place of hospitality, which was considered a religious duty [small wonder the home played such a vital rôle in the early church’s fellowship and evangelism].

Knowles (2010, p.5), in the light of the above, comments on ‘The Origin of House Churches’: **Jewish homes** like those described **became the basis for the house churches of the early Christian community** (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; etc); each family member and guest contributed something to the religious atmosphere; even the children had special religious duties as we see from the Passover *Seder*; aged members were respected and honoured; etc. In fact, the respected elders of these Jewish families – husbands, wives and wise grandparents, often became the ‘elders’ of the first house churches in the early Christian community.

5.2.2.

The influence of the synagogue.

Knowles (2010, p.6) writes that since the earliest Christians were Jews, the institution of the synagogue played a major rôle in the structuring of the first believing communities. Jews who believed, continue to live as Jews.¹¹⁷ In a certain sense Judaism and Christianity were not mutually exclusive. It is likely that the first Jewish believers were attached to synagogues. The later Gentile churches of Paul’s day were often formed with a core of believing Jews – some proselytes, and a majority of God-worshipers. To some extent, certainly in the earliest days, the synagogue provided some sort of pattern for the early Christian congregations – later of course there were adaptations under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

¹¹⁶ In Judaism, the home included not only the so-called nuclear family of today, but the full extended family of grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, etc.

¹¹⁷ See Brad Young’s *Jesus the Jewish Theologian*.

As to the matter of leadership, we must recognise that while there were 'offices' or functions within the synagogues, it remained true that (Marvin Wilson, p.216) "... Judaism is a religion of laypeople."

Indeed, even the rabbi was considered a layperson. Rabbis did not preside over synagogues – they were often itinerant teachers, discipling from place-to-place any who would listen. Any member of the synagogue could be called upon to read from the *Torah*, lead the congregational prayers, and teach. Members of synagogues were expected to be well-informed on all aspects of Judaism and the *Torah* – i.o.w. they were not ignorant, passive, 'sheep.' The apostle Peter, as a Jew, emphasised the non-authoritarian approach in church government: 1 Peter 5:2-3. The whole congregation was *a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God* (1 Pet. 2:9). Each individual was gifted in some way to build up the congregation (1 Pet. 4:10). Jesus Himself made clear where He stood on authoritarianism, He saw it as a Gentile characteristic rather than a Jewish/biblical one: Mk. 10:42-45.

5.3.

Synagogues also served as places of evangelistic ministry for the infant church.

Feinberg (1960, p.1127-1129) has reminded us of how the Gospels speak of the synagogues of Nazareth (Mt. 13:54; Lk. 4:16) and Capernaum (Mk. 1:21; Jn. 6:59) as places where our Lord ministered. Paul and his fellow-workers visited synagogues wherever they went in Palestine, Asia Minor and Greece. In the Book of Acts several passages describe the rôle of the synagogue in the early church: e.g. Acts 13:5, referring to Paul and Barnabas's proclamation of the Word in the synagogues of Salamis (Cyprus); Acts 13:4, referring to a similar ministry in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch; Acts 14:1 referring to their preaching 'the good news' in Iconium; etc. These scriptures support Pfeiffer's conclusion (1960, p. 510), "The synagogue proved to be a fruitful field for evangelism by early Christian missionaries..." Feinberg (1960, p.1127) put it this way, "The book of Acts indicates the rôle the synagogue played in the propagation of the new messianic faith."

5.4.

Theological weaknesses in the synagogue system, from a Christian perspective, included: an anti-Trinitarian stance, with the transcendence of God stressed in such a

way that it made any conception of incarnation impossible; the Judaistic focus on the *Torah's study and interpretation* – this, together with the vanishing of sacrifice, in the course of time diminished the sense of sin. Traditional Judaism recognized two impulses in man, one good, one bad, by virtue of his creation, *not fall*; the evil impulse could be checked by study of the Torah; etc (Ellison, pp.552-553).

A theological *strength* of the synagogue system was its stress on community rather than on the individual only (Ellison, p.553).

5.5.

To determine the precise extent of the impact of synagogue worship on early church worship is difficult.

Colquhoun (1960, p.325) has pointed out that the earliest liturgical forms of the church concerning, for example, the Holy Communion formularies, are to be found in the *Didache* (circa AD 100), prescribing acts of thanksgiving for the cup and the bread, but also giving liberty to the 'prophets' to use what words they liked in setting apart the elements. The accounts by Justin Martyr (mid second century) also indicate liturgical teaching – however, a place was still found for extemporaneous prayers and thanksgivings. It was really only by the beginning of the third century that a set form of prayer was used around the Lord's Table, and even then it varied from place to place. The more liturgical churches have concluded that the early Christians organized their church government and liturgy totally around the synagogue model.¹¹⁸ However, while it is true that at first the Christians seem to have shared in the common worship of the temple and simultaneously engaged in house church services peculiarly Christian (Acts 2:46), they **did not derive all their machinery of worship and church government from the Jewish synagogue** – even the traditionalists agree that this is going too far.

¹¹⁸ LITURGICA.COM, 2010. *The Jewish Components of Christian Worship*. Available at: <http://www.liturgica.com/html/litEChLitJ.jsp> [Accessed 15 March 2010]. (This article includes excerpts from: Williams, B. Anstey, H., 1990. *Orthodox Worship: A Living Continuity with the Synagogue, the Temple and the Early Church*. Minneapolis: Light and Life Publishing). The writer cites Alfred Edersheim's description of the six basic components in synagogue worship: the Litany; the Confession; Intercessory Prayer; Scripture Readings; Preaching; Benediction. Edersheim maintains that these birthed the Church, and that the components of Jewish worship which came into Christianity did so in the same order. The article concludes, "early Christian Churches used a design very similar to Jewish synagogues. A natural development occurred as the new Christian Church formulated its own theology and understanding, but the core connection to Judaic form was never lost" (p.4). It then goes on to describe the revolutionary effect of Jesus' transformation of the Passover into the Lord's Supper (p.5-10).

One of the most important influences in the adaptation of the synagogue model of worship was obviously the *entrance of Gentile Christians* into the church. This led to the introduction of a modified church organization somewhat different from the Jewish synagogue and more suited to the requirements of Christianity.¹¹⁹

5.6.

Christian worship, theologically, had its origins in the death and resurrection of Jesus.¹²⁰ Without Easter, there was no Christian worship. We might even say that whenever Christians met to worship they celebrated Easter. The two places that largely shaped Christian worship were the Jewish synagogue *and* the Upper Room. These shaped the two foci in Christian worship, viz. Word and Table (see Acts 2:42) (1 Cor. 11:23-26; Mk. 14:22-23; Mt. 26:26-28; Lk. 22:17-20, 24:13-35). From the Upper Room came: (a) the story that transforms all Christian worship; (b) the meal that is its central and distinctive act.

5.7.

In conclusion, was there another, specific synagogue-based model of church in the first one or two centuries of the church *apart* from that of house church? While it may be easy to read that scenario back into history, the evidence would appear to suggest: (a) if there was, it was of a highly temporary nature; (b) there is no great scriptural and historical evidence of such a model; (c) no doubt, following the institutionalisation of the church by Constantine in the third century, synagogue and even temple models gained huge ground, especially in the more traditionalistic and sacramentalistic denominations.

6. CHURCH, KINGDOM AND CULTURE

The biblical material relating to the church must deal with the whole matter of the kingdom of Christ as well as church and culture¹²¹, whether speaking of the

¹¹⁹ 1902 Encyclopedia, 2005-10. *Constitution of the Christian Community. The Synagogue System*. Available at : <http://www.1902encyclopedia.com/C/CHR/christianity-20.html> [Accessed 15 March 2010].

¹²⁰ Origin of Christian Worship – Abbey Baptist Church, 2010. *Origin of Christian Worship*. Available at: <http://www.abbeybaptistchurch.org.uk/1originofchristianworship.htm> [Accessed 15 March 2010].

¹²¹ Getz (1974, pp.10, 20) has the following approach to Church and culture (summarised by George Peters in his Foreword to Getz's *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* p. 10): Getz consistently speaks about the threefold 'lens' of **Scripture, history and culture**. This approach points up the fact that churches are not to live *in the Bible* but *by the Bible* and *in history* and *in cultural milieu*. While the Bible

traditional church, house churches, etc.

Barth (1960, p.147), writing on Church and kingdom, says “Where the Church is, there it has an aim, the kingdom of God.” He goes on to speak about the greatness of this goal –

“We may often have a distaste for the whole of church life. If you do not know this oppression, if you simply feel well inside the Church walls, you have certainly not seen the real dynamic in this matter. In the Church we may be just like a bird in a cage which is always hitting against the bars. Something bigger is at stake than our bit of preaching and liturgy!” [the writer submits that the house church movement, in general, has a better grasp of this kingdom picture than strongly traditional/denominational churches – the subject is constantly taught on and talked about in house church circles, in contrast to my experience of traditional churches across the board].

Küng (1986, p.92) likewise contends that the kingdom is far bigger than the church.

“The eschatological community of believers comes from the preaching of the reign of God – the reign of God is its beginning and its foundation. And it moves toward the revealed consummation of the reign of God – the reign of God is its goal, its limitation, its judgment. The Church is not the kingdom of God, but it looks toward the kingdom of God, waits for it, or rather makes a pilgrimage towards it as its herald, proclaiming it to the world” (1986, p.95).

122

remains constant and is our absolute norm for church life, the latter – history and culture – constantly change and demand form and cultural changes in order to remain related to the world in which they are to serve. The process of institutionalisation can easily ‘freeze’ churches into patterns that invite stagnation and death. The way out is the continuous metamorphosis of the churches without changing the changeless message and yielding the standards, ideals and purpose as stated in the Scriptures. [for a helpful diagram of the lenses of Scripture (Eternal), History (Past), Culture (Present), leading to a Philosophy of the Ministry and Contemporary Strategy, see p. 20 of Getz’s *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*]

¹²² Küng (1986, pp.96-104) has a good section on the Church “In the Service of the Reign of God.”

According to Snyder (2004, pp.139ff), kingdom growth is not institutional growth,¹²³ in fact institutionalism can cause all kinds of barriers to kingdom-growth: unbiblical traditions, rigid structures, dependence on buildings, a clergy-laity divide, etc. Therefore, according to Snyder (2004, pp.31ff), examining and reflecting on culture are necessary components of a kingdom vision. The gospel concerns itself with all of society, not merely with the institutional church. We need to ask questions like what are the implications of the biblical view of reality for art, education, politics, family life, economics, music, philosophy? All, ultimately, must come under the lordship of Christ.

6.1.

The essence of the kingdom of God.

A little outline, provided by Snyder (2004, pp.15-18):

- a. The kingdom of God is the dominion or reign of God, and not primarily a place or a realm. Snyder cites van Ruler (in 2004, p.15): biblically, the kingdom 'refers first to a reign, dominion, or rule and only secondarily to the realm over which a reign is exercised' (Ps. 24:1).
- b. The OT does not use the phrase 'the kingdom of God,' but through the Psalms and the Prophets it continually reminds us that God is king and proclaims God's reign or dominion.
- c. In the NT the mystery of the kingdom is that God's dominion and plan centre in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the Messiah, the anointed, Spirit-endowed Son of the King. Jesus came preaching the kingdom, announcing that in Him the rule, reign and dominion of God were present on earth in a new way.
- d. Jesus refused to set up the kind of kingdom Israel/most people were expecting. Instead He spoke about the 'mystery of the kingdom.' Through His life, death and resurrection and visitation via the Holy Spirit, He established the church, the community entrusted with living and proclaiming the mystery of the kingdom to the ends of the earth.

¹²³ Here we note those who have insisted on the principle of a 'regenerate church membership.' Of course, how to practically determine someone's 'regenerate state' is not always an easy question. One can only look to the spiritual, social and moral outworkings of the Christ-life within such members (Gal. 5, etc).

- e. Paul spoke about ‘the mystery of the gospel’ (Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:3; etc), i.e. the unfolding of God’s previously hidden purposes, now revealed in Jesus and the events of His life, i.e. the creation of a new, reconciled community of believers through the proclamation of Christ. Salvation was extended to both Jew and Gentile. Through this community, God’s manifold wisdom should be revealed to all of creation – the ‘mystery’ was to bring ‘all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ’ (Eph. 1:9-10).
- f. The kingdom is thus present and future, earthly and heavenly, hidden and visible. It will be fully manifest when Christ returns to earth in power and glory.

We refer here also to **Ladd’s classic on the kingdom** (1959, pp.22-23).¹²⁴ He examines the views of von Harnack, Dodd, Schweitzer, Augustine, etc (1959, pp.15-16). Ladd deals with Culmann’s differentiation between ‘kingdom of God’ and ‘kingdom of Christ,’ which he sees as invalid (1959, p.115).¹²⁵ He concludes that the Bible speaks of the kingdom as the realm into which we enter as present (Lk. 16:16; Mt. 21:31; etc), sometimes as though it were future (Mk.9:47; Mt. 7:21; etc). Fundamentally the Kingdom of God is God’s sovereign reign; but God’s reign expresses itself in different stages through redemptive history.

“Therefore, men may enter into the realm of God’s reign in its several stages of manifestation and experience the blessings of His reign in different degrees. God’s Kingdom is the realm of the Age to Come, popularly called heaven; then we shall realize the blessings of His Kingdom (reign) in the perfection of their fullness. But the Kingdom is here now. There is a realm of spiritual blessing into which we may enter today and enjoy in part but in

¹²⁴ For another perspective on Ladd’s view of the kingdom and the church, see Grudem (1994, pp.863-864): (a) the church is not the kingdom; (b) the kingdom creates the church; (c) the church witnesses to the kingdom (Mt. 24:14); (d) the church is the instrument of the kingdom (Mt. 10:8, etc); (e) the church is the custodian of the kingdom (Mt. 16:19).

¹²⁵ Ladd (1959, p.28) comments on Cullmann’s concept of time in his *Christ and Time*: “Cullmann conceives of time as extending backwards before creation, but this raises a philosophical question about which the Scriptures are silent.” On Cullmann’s distinction between kingdom of God and kingdom of Christ, Ladd concludes (1959, p.115), “The Kingdom of God is at the same time the Kingdom of Christ (Eph. 5:5); for the Kingdom of God, the redemptive reign of God, is manifested through the person of Christ, and it is Christ who must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet (1 Cor. 15:25). [For another, similar assessment of Cullmann on this subject, see the *Evangelical Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. W.A. Elwell, p. 312]

reality the blessings of God's Kingdom (reign) ... The life and fellowship of a Christian church ought to be a fellowship of people among whom God's will is done – a bit of heaven on earth" (1959, pp.22-23).

6.1.1.

Snyder's (2004, pp.30-31) five elements essential to a 'biblical kingdom-consciousness,' essential to any healthy ecclesiology.

- a. An emphasis on the *cosmic dimensions of the gospel*. Ephesians 1 teaches that personal redemption fits into an overall divine cosmic design, namely the reconciliation of all things in Christ (unfortunately much of evangelicalism has been in the past caught up with the former to the detriment of the latter – personal comment).
- b. A recovery of *the dynamic breadth of the Word of God*. We must be wise enough to continue to affirm the infallibility of the Word of God while going on to say that it is supremely Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:1, 14). Continuous and renewed openness to God's Word is a key to churches existing not just for themselves but for God's redemptive, liberating purposes.
- c. A recovery of *a sense of history*. It is true that the definitive establishing of the kingdom awaits the return of Christ; it is equally true that God is now working in history, principally through the church (Eph. 3:10) to usher in His kingdom.
- d. A new emphasis on *the ethics of the kingdom*. Jesus' teachings make plain that the kingdom of God in its present reality means a life of discipleship. 'Kingdom consciousness' means a deep awareness of the cost of discipleship (here discipleship in small groups/house churches has a huge advantage over the almost non-existent discipling of preaching Services – personal comment).¹²⁶
- e. *A Christian view of culture*. Examining and reflecting on culture are necessary components of a kingdom vision.

¹²⁶ The writer has been involved with an interdenominational missions mobilisation movement in the Eastern Cape for the past 20 odd years. Over the years, and even this past week (03/02/2009), the Supervisory Board of Control was confronted with the appalling lack of discipling in churches in general, with the result that our many contacts regularly plead for training in ordinary Christian discipleship, which is actually the primary job of the local church!

6.1.2.

Wagner (2004, pp.59ff) endorses much of Snyder, especially regards *the church's call from a parochial to a much broader kingdom ministry*. He develops such 'kingdom thinking' around six points (2004, pp.62ff):

- It is about the lordship of Christ and the transformation of society.
- It is about the church in the workplace: *ekklesia* can happen anywhere [house churches today major on this – personal comment].
- Christian ministry extends beyond the local church to the everyday. [house churches major on this]
- The church has a God-designed government: 'apostles' and 'prophets' who minister to/in the extended church.
- We must understand the full scope of the word "workplace": apostles operate in the workplace also.
- Apostles in the workplace will work through two strategic gates:
 - i. social transformation [despite so much evangelism worldwide, why have cities and nations not been transformed? – personal comment]
 - ii. transference of wealth (the release of wealth for the advancement of the kingdom)

6.2.

Kingdom and culture.

6.2.1.

On the issue of the gospel of the kingdom and culture, Christensen (1986, p.4) states that today's apostles are essentially those gifted by the Spirit in teaching across cultures. They

“must ensure that cultural additions do not invade the Gospel given.
The Church needs to know what is authoritative Gospel valid for every culture and what are the cultural applications of the Gospel which never become the authoritative Gospel.... cross-cultural ministry brings us as

Christians to the cutting edge of cultural change because we will be pointing out where our culture has gone astray and where we have strayed.”

He adds two further points (*Christian Mission for Today*, n.d., p.14):

- The Mission of Christ, the King, is characterized by *shepherding/discipling*. [advantages of houses churches – personal comment]
- Responsible local churches train their people in *shepherding care which extends to other cultures* [hence the advantage of house church-plants cross-culturally – personal comment].

6.2.2.

Pearce (2005, p.54), writing from the standpoint of our youth, quotes Mittelberg to the effect that:

“we fail to realize that our church world is also a culture unto itself, and that we have tended to become increasingly insular... we have developed our own in-house language and codes of conduct, many of which are based on preferences or traditions rather than on the Bible’s teachings.” In this regard there is “a need to try and understand youth culture.”

6.2.3.

With regard to understanding and penetrating the culture of *youth* in the name of the gospel, Codrington and Swartz (1999, p.124) add that the church has talked much about ‘unreached people groups’ at the ends of the earth, however we also

“continue to have ‘unreached peoples’ living in our own neighbourhoods. These are people who have not heard the gospel even once – they are going to be young people who live in a plethora of virgin cultures, for the most part unaccessed or inaccessible to adult missionaries... Every culture needs to be impacted and penetrated by the gospel. The multitude of youth cultures is no exception. And then once that culture has been penetrated and youth come to Christ, let’s not demand that

young people lose their culture... Let us at least, having learnt past painful lessons, allow room for Christ himself to transcend these cultures.”¹²⁷

6.3.

Insensitivity to cultures in attempting to extend God’s kingdom.

Newbigin (1964, pp.12ff), speaking from much cross-cultural mission research and experience, refers to how missions was conceived for so long as the extension of the frontiers of Christendom and the conveyance of the blessings of civilisation to those who had hitherto been without them. In the light of this, a distinction obviously had to be drawn between the Gospel and western culture, and this in turn meant that the Church, as the body which – in whatever cultural environment – lived by the Gospel alone, had to be distinguished from the society in which it was set.

Many mistakes have been made in *Africa*, for example. Thlagale (2008, p.1) states that Colonialism did not create space for African culture. The aspiration of the dominant group was to civilize Africans or bring them into their culture. It was the refusal to recognize Africans as equals and to recognize their own worldview and its inherent values that complicated issues. It was also this denial that compelled Africans to accept Christianity yet cling to their own culture: “Inculturation argues that faith can find a home in an African culture and indeed open up its new home to new challenges.”

African Traditional Religion¹²⁸ has indeed many ‘contact points’ which can be exploited, e.g. many traditional African stories speak of how God or God’s son once lived among the people, but, when humans did something to give offence to God, the divine withdrew to the heavens...

¹²⁷ The writer has in past years engaged with a group of black African youth in the Kwanaxolo township of Port Elizabeth who have enriched missions movements in Port Elizabeth and appeared on reconciliation programs on national TV, because they have truly absorbed the gospel but at the same time communicate its essence via African youth culture and especially the genre of Kwaito rap music. Coming from a gangster background, the gospel is transforming them and their community in significant ways. [it is interesting and perhaps significant that the discipling of these young men has taken place largely in the context of small groups]

¹²⁸ Thlagale, B., (n.d.). Bringing the African Culture into the Church. Available from: <http://www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/thlagale.htm> [Accessed March 2008].

Edwards (n.d., pp.xvff) gives some examples of cultural insensitivity in Albania. He was one of the first entrants to Albania when the world's first 'fully atheist' country opened up to the outside world. This country of 3 million people had not heard the Word spoken nor seen it in print for almost 50 years. In the first months hundreds of evangelical Christians from the West flooded into Albania, with an 'evangelistic assault.' Recently, of a claim that 30,000 converted to Christianity, only about 200 can be found gathering in church communities. Many imposed [says Edwards, a N. American himself] American culture on Albanian Christianity. Within months Western church forms, liturgies, typical Western 'Sunday morning one-hour Services' were the norm all over, with preaching monologue to people in straight pews and no member-participation whatsoever. The Western institutional church had arrived in Albania. Edwards describes it as a 'tragedy.'

6.4.

In summary, *some perspectives concerning the kingdom and its effect on CHURCH STRUCTURE.*

As Snyder (1996, pp.171-173) points out, the life and ministry of the church should be built on viable large-group **and small group structures** [my emphasis] as the early church's common life of worship, fellowship, nurture and ultimately *cross-cultural* [my emphasis] witness reveals. While Snyder, in the writer's opinion, still cannot let go the 'large group' of traditional church (see 'cell church' concept in the next chapter), he makes the point that Church history reveals a *recurring tendency to absolutise and institutionalise the large group*, wedding it to a specific building and form and even culture, while neglecting or even condemning the small group which may be crossing cultural barriers quite naturally. Virtually every major movement of spiritual renewal in the Christian church has been accompanied by **a return to the small group** and proliferation of such groups in private homes for Bible study, prayer and discussion of the faith [see for example the class meetings of John Wesley in the 18th century]. "Therefore, whatever other structures may be found useful, large-group and small-group structures should be fundamental."

Snyder feels that (1996, p.173) there is no biblical basis for hierarchical or pyramid-type denominational structures (whatever their usefulness). Nor does the NT suggest the

total independence of local congregations. We should therefore apply the organic, ecological principles of body life, recognizing our functional interdependence (Eph. 5:21) in the extension of Christ's kingdom. This approach makes for healthy global, cross-cultural witness, with the following advantages, among others (1996, p.175):

- The church as biblically presented is always cross-culturally relevant.
- The basic structures of 'charismatic' (in the biblical sense) leadership, small-group/large-group gatherings, and trans-local networking are always cross-culturally viable.
- The exercise of spiritual gifts will result in cross-cultural witness.
- The church is itself an essentially missional structure, and any group of missionaries may be a legitimate embodiment of the church.

While Snyder and others (excluding Edwards) mentioned above do not specifically espouse the house church as posited in this dissertation, **just about every point made with regard to a 'kingdom-approach' to church and the world signals the importance of the small group**, which of course lies at the heart of house church practice. Thus, for example, we may compare the outward-looking, kingdom-oriented flavour of a Bible-based house church to the more-often-than-not parochial and denominational flavour of most of the denominational/traditional churches the writer has pastored or visited over many years.

The writer likes the way Peterson (2007, pp.21-23) **speaks of the kingdom in terms of Jesus as 'the Way'** (Jn. 14:6). Jesus announces the gospel story in Mark 1. As the story proceeds, it turns out that by using the term 'kingdom,' Jesus

"is defining reality comprehensively as God's reality (you can't get more comprehensive than 'kingdom'). Kingdom is what Jesus reveals, patiently but insistently, word by word, act by act. Real life, the real world, is a vast theater of salvation, directed by our wise and totally involved God."

When Jesus calls us to follow, repent and believe, these are invitations to live *this* reality, *this* kingdom, following Jesus (2007, p.21). [House church, with its confrontation

of day-to-day living because it is essentially not a model but *a way of life*, Monday to Sunday, identifies with the above (my comment)]. Peterson (2007, p.23) reminds us that the primary term for identifying the followers of Jesus in the early church was ‘the Way.’ Luke in writing the story of the first Christian community uses it six times (Acts 9:2; 19:8, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), most famously, perhaps, recording Paul in his sermonic defence before Felix: “this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors...” (24:14). [‘Christian,’ used in Antioch to refer to these people, is used only once (Acts 11:26)].

7. WHAT WOULD A RENEWED CHURCH LOOK LIKE, ACCORDING TO THE BIBLE?

7.1.

The ‘irreducible minimum’ of church.

Coming from a Lutheran/traditional perspective, Moltmann (1978, pp.33-34) writes, “Congregation... is no longer the sum of all those who are registered as members on the church rolls. **Congregation is rather “a new kind of living together for human beings that affirms”:**

- That none is alone with his or her problems,
- That none has to conceal his or her disabilities,
- That there not some who have the say and others who have nothing to say,
- That neither the old nor the little ones are isolated,
- That one bears the other even when it is unpleasant and there is no agreement, and
- That, finally, the one can also at times leave the other in peace when the other needs it. ¹²⁹

¹²⁹ These points are found much more in a house church setting than in a traditional church setting.

Moltmann (1978, p.33) adds, “In many churches today where there is much preaching but little community, there are arising groups which seek community even at the expense of privacy. To that end they even open their own *homes* [my emphasis].”

He (1978, p.33) mentions that ‘Grass-roots’ and integrated congregations are already in existence (1978, p.33). One need make only a small effort to seek them out. There are remedies against the sickness of a private kind of Christianity-without-commitment. Such communities are quite visible, for whoever cannot be seen cannot be accepted either. They are open communities in which everyone may participate. In those communities many persons find healing for the suffering society has inflicted upon them. The healing of the sick is a ministry in their midst. They are communities that eat and drink before open doors so that everyone can eat and drink with them. They are voluntary communities that allow for individual initiatives so that individuals must not only listen but may also speak and expect to find a hearing. Was Moltmann, while remaining part of the traditional church, anticipating **grass-roots communities as a valid way of being church?** He (1978, p.34) wrote,

“It is to be lamented that “society and church often do not recognise these new communities but mistrustfully repress them.”

He calls for an end to discrimination against student congregations, communities who live together, and action groups of various kinds working among the periphery of society. [The writer’s argument is that it is more practical to fulfil many of Moltmann’s ideals via a ‘house church and network set-up’ in order to establish the kingdom on earth (Mt. 6) – for reasons of flexibility, mobility, true *koinonia*, etc].

Birkey (1988, p.155) gives an indication of what a NT church looks like - Looking at the Acts passages, he says **the renewed church relates in essentially four ways:**

- The first believers related to the apostles as *a learning people*. Devoted to the explanation of God’s revelation, they learned to honour God.
- They related to one another as *a sharing community*. Thus they experienced equality in every way.

- They related to God as a *worshipping community*, resulting in various expressions of joyful praise and heart-felt sincerity.
- They related to the Head of the body as a confessing and *witnessing community*. This resulted in constant allegiance to the local assembly and in witness to those outside of the Christian community.

Birkey (1988, pp.155-156) summarizes: “As an alternative to the traditional model, **the house church** contains within its structure the potential of realizing these marks of church vitality.”

8. TOWARD ‘AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF HOUSE CHURCH.’

8.1.

Clearing up some *common misconceptions* regarding the house church.

8.1.1.

The writer believes that it is a totally mistaken notion to suggest that the only reason the apostolic community of the NT developed house churches was because it had no other option, i.e. because there were no ‘church buildings’ per se, because of persecution, the unique NT context, etc.

Hadaway, Wright and DuBose (1978, p.67) have pointed out,

“Even though the missional nature of the early church compelled it to forms of public witness outside the homes as an augmentation to the evangelism which happened there, it was the common life of the house church centred on its teaching, fellowship and worship which provided the theological and spiritual basis for that witness. The dynamic which made the early church such a vital and effective community was its **rootage in the homes.**”

They (1987, p.68) continue, “the house church was the centre of the administrative principles which guided the church in the NT era *and beyond*” [my emphasis]) They quote Filson (cited in 1978, p.68) on the subject of church structure and leadership to

the effect that “The development of church polity can never be understood without reference to the house churches.”

There is (1987, pp.69-70) a continuity between the apostolic church and the church which followed this era up until the time of Constantine – through the house church and the kind of spiritual life it fostered. For generations after the apostles, the church continued its spontaneous lay (people of God) witness in the cities and along the great trade routes of the empire. However, some ideological changes were taking place which were altering the New Testament theology of the church. The plurality and equality of leadership was giving way to a hierarchical arrangement with the bishop becoming the central figure... Other aspects of theological adaptation came with a more sacramental understanding of baptism and the Eucharist... Additional doctrinal formulations brought new ecclesiological perceptions which were to have substantial impact on ecclesiology. This in time, had profound implications for the function and structure of the church.

8.1.2.

The writer is *not* advocating here a kind of rigid ‘biblical blueprintism’ when it comes to the house church, i.e. the idea that the NT contains a rigid, detailed, meticulous, unwavering blueprint for church practice in all ages. Nor does the NT contain a rigid list of rules and regulations for Christians to follow – according to this view the NT is a detailed manual for church practice. Viola (2008, p.243) points out a two-fold flaw of this approach: (a) It turns the NT into a modern replica of ancient Judaic Law; (b) Those who hold to this model disagree with one another as to which practices ought to be followed to create ‘a NT church.’

Rather, the writer is commending the application of the ‘root principles’ of the church applying in different contexts.

8.1.3.

We also need to **warn against the opposite danger of ‘over-contextualisation.’** There are those who are quick to point out that human culture changes all the time – champions of this view say that in every age the church must radically reinvent itself (to the detriment of the biblical basics) in order to adapt to the current culture. As Viola (2008, p.38) has noted, contextualisation is certainly needed when we apply Scripture.

It's because of contextualisation that we don't wear sandals, togas, speak Greek and use horses for transportation. However there is the danger of over-contextualisation to the point of 'throwing out the baby with the bath water.' Such a trend

“eats up the biblical text to where it disappears entirely. And we are left to create the church after our own image. Bruce warns against the dangers of over-contextualisation, saying, ‘The restatement of the gospel in a new idiom is necessary in every generation – as necessary as its translation into new languages. [But] in too much that passes for restatement of the gospel, the gospel itself disappears, and the resultant product is what Paul would call ‘another gospel which in fact is no gospel at all’ (Gal. 1:6ff). When the Christian message is so thoroughly accommodated to the prevalent climate of opinion that it becomes one more expression of that climate of opinion, it is no longer the Christian message” (2008, p.38).

This applies to ecclesiology as well, for **there are normative practices that transcend time and culture (e.g. Acts 2:42) which cannot be dispensed with.** The fact of the matter is, virtually all Christians derive their ideas of the Christian life and church-life from the Bible. The early church was not perfect. If we doubt that, a simple reading of 1 Corinthians will suffice.

“On the other hand, the first-century church was the church that Jesus and the apostles founded. And insofar as the first-century communities were fleshing out the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, they can teach us a great deal” (2008, p.41).

8.2.

An ‘*organic ecclesiology.*’

8.2.1.

Austin-Sparks is the man who deserves credit for the term ‘**organic church.**’¹³⁰ He wrote (cited in Viola, 2008, p.18),

“God’s way and law of fullness is that of organic life. In the divine order, life produces its own organism, whether it be vegetable, animal, human or spiritual. This means that everything comes from the inside. Function, order and fruit issue from this law of life within. It was solely on this principle that what we have in the New Testament came into being. Organized Christianity has entirely reversed this order.”

8.2.2.

A house church ecclesiology would have to be based on a type of *organic church.*

It has to do with ‘roots and fruits.’ It has to do with the basic ‘soil-type’ of the NT – we recall the many organic/agricultural parables and teachings of Jesus regarding the Kingdom and its essence and outworking. While the NT Scriptures are authoritative in terms of the principles involved and ‘house church’ is firmly rooted in the NT, the house church movement, as already indicated, is generally not based on a narrow, ‘NT paradigm’ where everything has to be done *exactly* as it was done in the 1st century church. Obviously the NT had its particular context and our times have their particular context. It is a matter of using the ‘NT soil’ of the church, i.e. the basic, organic principles of church-life and growth as indicated in the NT (and the OT for that matter). These principles must then be applied as we study constantly the changing culture of our times – this includes the house church, for we cannot afford to ignore our postmodern culture as if it didn’t exist.

8.2.3.

The ‘apostolic tradition.’

Viola (2008, pp.244ff) has an interesting perspective on ‘apostolic tradition’ – what is it?

¹³⁰ Note that in chap. IV we will compare house church with ‘Organic Church’ as popularized recently by Neil Cole, a church planter in the USA. Cole’s approach has its strengths and weaknesses, which we will discuss at that point.

- It contains the stories and teachings of Jesus. These are contained in the Gospels.
- It includes the commands and practices of the apostles that were passed on to all the churches (1 Cor. 11:23ff; 15:1-3; 2 Pet. 3:1-2).

The apostolic tradition therefore represents **the normative beliefs and practices of the church of Jesus Christ** – beliefs and practices that *were prescribed for each and every church* (1 Cor. 4:16-17; 11:16; 14:33-38). Put another way (2008, pp.245-246),

“the apostolic tradition is the embodiment of those organic practices that the apostles modelled in every church during the first century. It is these practices that constitute the new wine skin that God has fashioned to preserve His new wine. In referring to the apostolic tradition, Bruce says (cited in Viola, 2008, pp.245-246), ‘Paul indeed seems to have attached some importance to preserving a certain measure of uniform practice throughout his churches.’ Simply put, if our church practices are derived from spiritual life, they will be in harmony with the apostolic tradition. Consequently, *what is written in the New Testament shouldn’t be viewed as irrelevant history. It’s a benchmark to test whether or not our church practices have a sound foundation.*”

To ignore apostolic traditions is to put us in the dangerous position of unknowingly substituting our own misguided feelings and unfounded thoughts for the Holy Spirit’s leading. The NT is our standard for faith and practice – both for individual conduct as well as for corporate life. While the church is an organism, it does have a form. Take for example our physical body. It is a living entity. Yet it has a specific form – a particular expression. And within that expression there is a certain harmony and order.

There is often an erroneous notion that only the ‘commands’ of the NT are to be heeded, while its ‘practices’ are irrelevant and antiquated. This idea has deluded many into embracing a raft of humanly devised practices that violate the *DNA* of the church. For example, salaried clergy, single pastors [i.e. the common, ‘pastor-led’ congregations],¹³¹

¹³¹ Grudem (1994, p.913), in dealing with other names for elders, e.g. pastors, overseers and bishops, points out that the least commonly used word (at least in the noun form) is *pastor* (Gk. *Poimen*). It may be

hierarchical leadership structures, denominations, and pulpit-pew styled services in basilica-like spaces [regarded by many as the equivalent of 'church'] are all at odds with the organic nature of the body of Christ.

Viola (2008, p.247) makes the vital point,

“Normative apostolic *commands* are binding on the contemporary church. But normative apostolic *practices* are as well. By normative, I mean *those practices that contain a spiritual subtext and are the outworking of the organic nature of the body of Christ*” [my emphasis] Such practices are not purely narrative. They carry prescriptive force. This means that they reflect the unchanging nature of God Himself. And *they naturally emerge whenever God’s people live in divine life together* – irrespective of culture or time [my emphasis]. In that connection, the Book of Acts and the Epistles are awash with references to the apostolic tradition (1 Cor. 4:17). Doctrine and duty, belief and behaviour, life and practice are ultimately inseparable.”

Observing the apostolic tradition does *not* mean re-enacting the events of the first-century church (e.g. casting lots to appoint leaders, praying on rooftops, etc) – instead, it means being faithful to what was theologically and spiritually significant in the experience of the early church. Among such practices Viola (2008:248ff) includes:

- *Open, participatory church meetings* – based on the priesthood of all believers and the every-member function of the body of Christ.
- *Observing the Lord’s Supper as a communal meal* of the church – built on the centrality of Christ and the covenantal relationship of the believing community.
- *House church meetings* – resting squarely on the fact that the church is a face-to-face community, a closely-knit, extended family that engages in mutual sharing and edification. House churches provide the best atmosphere for

surprising to us to find that this word, which has become so common in English, only occurs once in the NT when speaking about a church ‘officer.’ In Ephesians 4:11 Paul writes, “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some pastors and teachers.” The verse is probably better translated ‘pastor-teachers’ (one group) rather than ‘pastors and teachers’ (two groups) because of the Greek construction. The connection with teaching suggests that these pastors were some (or perhaps all) of the elders who carried on the work of teaching, for one qualification for an elder is that he be ‘able to teach’ (1 Tim. 3:2).

fleshing out the familial love that flows between the Father and the Son through the Spirit. [by contrast, it is virtually impossible to embody these elements in a building where the architecture fosters passivity among the congregation]. See John 4:21-24.

- The practical expression of the church's unity is rooted in the NT teaching that *there is only one body*. In many ways the denominational system violates this principle and distorts the indivisible oneness that exists within the body of Christ and the triune God.
- *Plural oversight and decision-making by consensus* – firmly grounded in the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ is Head of His church. It is also rooted in the mutual decision-making within the triune God.

Granted, there are other first-century practices beyond the ones mentioned: church planting by itinerant apostolic workers, gospel witness, missional living, social outreach, the baptism of new converts, the training of apostolic workers, etc.¹³² That said, the tradition of the apostles is vitally connected to the organic nature of the church, which is rooted in the triune God. And that nature is grounded in the unshakeable teaching of the NT.

8.2.4.

Does the twenty-first century have much in common with the first century?

An interesting point is made by Hesselgrave (2009, p.1),

“I believe it was Professor Edward Blaiklock of New Zealand who said that, of all the intervening centuries, the twentieth century was most like the first century. If he were alive today I think that he might conclude that the twenty-first century will be most like the first century. Why? Simply because the challenges that Christian churches and missions will face in the century

¹³² Personally I would include, in addition to Viola's points above, the incarnational/missional aspect of the NT church. As someone has said, 'The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.'

ahead are as unprecedented as those face by the early church in the first century!" [This endorses the house church approach].

8.3.

House church ecclesiology is a '*simple church*' ecclesiology.

Following on logically, we would have to conclude that we are talking here about *simple church*. The issue here is that we should not over-complicate the being/ doing of church [note our Lord's repeated call to come at the mysteries of the kingdom 'as little children'] – our ecclesiology should err on the side of simplicity rather than complexity. The church is essentially 'simple' as to its organic nature, ministry, structure, etc [from this 'simplicity' springs its profundity].

Latourette (1953, p.129ff), under the heading *Christianity Takes Shape in Organization, Doctrine*, wrote "at the outset, in the middle of the first century or earlier, **all that was required** for admission to the Christian fellowship represented by the Church was repentance, the affirmation that Jesus is Lord, baptism, and the reception of the Holy Spirit."

By contrast, the wide variety which was appearing in bodies which claimed the Christian name, especially the Gnostics and the Marcionites, seemed to call for a more detailed definition of the Gospel and additional tests for admission to the Church and continued membership in it. Thus came notable steps in the development of what was early called the Catholic Church and which soon, if it did not already do so, embraced the majority of those who thought themselves to be Christian.

There is in our time a yearning for simplicity. One is interested to read in magazines and witness on television those who stand outside of the Christian faith, beginning to simplify their lives/lifestyle, in order to find some kind of meaning in life. This is particularly so in the first world and more affluent nations. So also there are many in the Western church, who simply cannot handle any more the complexity of church affairs in traditional denominations and Christian groups of all sorts, and who are seeking a type of *simple church* in which to live out their faith.

Glover (1965, pp.62ff), in his classic *The Jesus of History*, has a section on 'The Teacher and the Disciples' in which he calls us to look for a moment at the men who followed Jesus: "They are **simple people in the main** [my emphasis] – warm hearts and impulsive natures."

Having covered the 'group,' Glover (1965, p.63) asks what is to be the 'method?'

"There is not very much method [my emphasis]. As von Harnack says about the spread of the early Church, 'a living faith needs no special methods' – a sentence worth remembering. 'Infinite love in ordinary intercourse' is another phrase of von Harnack in describing the life of the early Church. It began with Jesus. He chose twelve, says Mark (iii.14), 'that they may be with him.' That is all. And they are with him under all sorts of circumstances. 'The Son of Man hath not where to lay his head' (Luke ix.58). They saw him in privation, fatigued, exhausted. With every chance to see weaknesses in his character, they did not find much amiss with him. That is surely significant." Further on Glover (1965, pp.64-65) notes, "Their life was full of experiences shared with him. He has his reserve – his secret; yet, in another sense, he gives himself to them without reserve; there is prodigality of self-impartment in his dealings with them. He lets them have everything they can take. He becomes theirs in a great intimacy, he gives himself to them. Why? Because *he believes, as he put it, in seed* [my emphasis]. Socrates saw that the teacher's real work, his only work, is to implant the idea, like a seed; an idea, like a seed, will look after itself... There is very little of it, but that does not matter; it is alive (Matt. xiii.33). Life is a very little thing, but it is the only thing that counts. That is why the farmer can sow his fields and sleep at night without thinking of them; and the crop grows in spite of his sleeping, and he knows it (Mark iv.26). That is *why Jesus believes so thoroughly in his men, and in his message* [my emphasis]; God has made the one for the other, and there is no fear of mischance."

Glover (1965, pp.65ff) goes on to mention the simplicity of Jesus' teaching – essentially simple yet so profound and authoritative.

He (1965, p.63,68) concludes,

“The Church spread over the world without social machinery. The Gospel was preached *instinctively, naturally*” (my italics). Despite difficulties and persecution, the Church flourished. “I think that is how it began – *so naturally and spontaneously*. These people are so full of the love of Jesus that they are bound to speak (Acts viii.4). ‘One loving heart sets another on fire.’”

On this ‘simple church’ approach in practice, in different parts of the world (such as the USA and South Africa), the writer commends Kreider & McClung’s excellent little *Starting a House Church – A New Model for Living Out Your Faith*. [Kreider & McClung use the terms ‘house church’ and ‘simple church’ interchangeably].

8.4.

House church ecclesiology is an ‘ecclesiology of the Word.’

The organising ‘principle’ of the house church, i.e. its basic *DNA* is **the NT and indeed the Living Word Himself**.¹³³ He is the organic Head of the body Who inspires, directs and energises the life and witness of the church. Christ is the eternal Principle, Who incarnates and ‘reincarnates’ Himself in the house church, leading to the reproduction of His image in the world. The idea of ‘simple church’/ ‘house church’ is in a sense ‘natural and instinctive’ within each culture – *it will happen naturally as people, in whatever context and culture, give themselves to the revelation of Scripture and the Holy Spirit*. .

The church thus grows by multiplication rather than addition, just as cellular life multiplies in all forms of life including that of the human body.

Simson (1998, p.241) has an interesting little parable on ‘**Spiritual DNA**.’ He relates how (in the realm of biology), *DNA*, the basic building block of life, makes up the

¹³³ One finds that most of the Cell Church authors speak of Christ being the *DNA* of the church/cell group. Unfortunately, in my opinion, the somewhat hierarchical structures of the cell church work against this principle in practice.

chromosomes or seed structure, and is responsible for the species, size, shape and quality of the organism which is created out of it.

“The powerful effects of a spreading virus infection depends very much on the power of the *DNA* of the virus. The virus infects a perfectly normal cell, and introduces its own *DNA* into it, whereby the ‘host’ cell is transformed into the image of the virus – and becomes sick. Similarly, we [as believers and as church, as the writer understands Simson] are all carriers of a spiritual and heavenly *DNA*, the *DNA* of the Kingdom of God, containing *the pattern of the church* [my italics] right within each of us. Everything we touch, therefore, will be also be infected with, or at least affected by, this wonderful disease and transformed into the image of Christ on earth, literally forming His body according to the genetic code wherever we go. The result will be growth through infection, a true multiplication system like yeast in a dough [remember Jesus’ parables about yeast – personal comment], almost unstoppable in terms of quantity” (1998, pp.241-242).

8.5.

House church ecclesiology is a ‘Trinitarian ecclesiology.’

Viola (2008, pp.33ff) takes the former point further. He sees the spiritual *DNA* of the church as being *the triune God*. As we know, classic Christianity teaches that God is a fellowship of three persons: Father, Son and Spirit. In the words of the Athanasian Creed, ‘The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, yet there are not three gods, but one God.’ God triune means that God is *social or relational* – *God is the ‘social Trinity.’ And for this reason, we can say that God is ‘community.’ God is the community of the Father, Son, and Spirit, who enjoy perfect and eternal fellowship.* Not only is the Trinity the most comprehensive and integrative framework that we have for understanding and participating in the Christian life, but the triune God is also the key *DNA* of the church.

“The church is an organic extension of the triune God. It was conceived in Christ before time (Eph. 1:4-5) and born on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1ff). Properly conceived, the church is the gathered community that shares God’s

life and expresses it in the earth. Put another way, the church is the earthly image of the triune God (Eph. 1:22-23). Because the church is organic, it has a natural expression. Accordingly, when a group of Christians follows their spiritual *DNA*, they will gather in a way that matches the *DNA* of the triune God (while we Christians are by no means divine, we have been privileged to be ‘partakers of the divine nature’ – 2 Peter 1:4 NASB). Consequently, the *DNA* of the church is marked by the very traits that we find in the triune God. Particularly, mutual love, mutual fellowship, mutual dependence, mutual honor, mutual submission, mutual dwelling, and authentic community” (2008, p.35).

As we look again at the triune God, we notice what is absent: hierarchical structures, one-upmanship, religious rituals and program. Command-style relationships, hierarchy, passive spectatorship, one-upmanship, religious programs, etc. were created by fallen humans. They run contrary to the *DNA* of the triune God as well as the *DNA* of the church (2008, p.36).

Viola (2008, p.40) concludes,

“I believe that the New Testament is a record of the church’s *DNA* at work. When we read the Book of Acts and the Epistles, we are watching the genetics of the church of Jesus Christ expressing itself in various cultures during the first century. Because the church is truly a spiritual organism, its *DNA* never changes. It’s the same biological entity yesterday, today, and tomorrow.”

As such, the *DNA* of the church will always reflect these four elements (2008, p.41):

1. It will always express the *headship of Christ* in His church as opposed to the headship of a human being (‘headship’ = Christ as both the authority and source of the church).
2. It will always allow for and encourage *every-member functioning* of the body.
3. It will always *map to NT theology*, giving it visible expression on the earth.

4. It will always be *grounded in the fellowship of the triune God*.

Viola (2008, pp.46-48) uses a very **helpful metaphor** at this point, viz. that of a flowering shrub, the big-leaf hydrangea. If one takes the seed of this shrub and plants it in the soil of Indiana (USA), it will yield pink flowers. But the same seed in the soil of Brazil or Poland will produce blue flowers. The process repeated in another kind of soil will yield purple flowers.¹³⁴ However the hydrangea will never produce thorns or thistles, oranges or apples. It will never grow tall like a pine tree. Why? Because these features are not within the *DNA* of the seed. In the same way, the church of Christ – when planted properly and left on its own without human control and institutional interference – will produce certain features by virtue of its *DNA*. Like the big-leaf hydrangea, the church may look different from culture to culture, but it will have the same basic expression wherever it's allowed to flourish. On the other hand, when humans introduce their often fallen systems into this living organism, the church loses her organic features and produces a foreign expression that runs contrary to her *DNA*. To put it bluntly, it is possible to distort the organic growth and violate its *DNA*.

8.6.

House church ecclesiology is a 'missional/incarnational ecclesiology.

The church/house church is *essentially* missional and incarnational [we have already expounded this statement at some length, so we will be brief here]. It operates around the *DNA* of Christ, after all. Missiology is a multidisciplinary field that reads the Bible with missiological eyes and, based on that reading, continually reexamines, reevaluates and redirects the church's participation in God's mission in God's world. This is the theology which spawns, directs and drives the house church ecclesiology.

¹³⁴ The different colours of the hydrangea are of course influenced by the pH of the soil in which it is planted.

8.7.

House church ecclesiology is ‘a family ecclesiology.’

Again, we have already treated the subject of ‘church and family’ fairly extensively. One simply cannot separate church and family/the home, the basic building-block of humankind since time began – the Scriptures will simply not allow this. The family spawns the church in so many ways.

The writer believes that we have neglected this truth of the family being basic to the church to our peril – scan the postmodern family, society and church.

Viola (2008, p.100), in a powerful section on ‘Reimagining the Family of God’ [he sees the ‘family of God’ as the ‘chief metaphor’ depicting the church in the NT: Gal. 6:10; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 5:1-2; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:2; 1 Jn. 2:12-13; etc], put it this way,

“Regrettably, present-day society is plagued by what sociologists call the ‘dysfunctional family.’ This is a family that has been profoundly broken in some way. It may be intact outwardly, but it’s damaged inwardly. If the truth be told, *many of our modern churches are in every sense of the word ‘dysfunctional families.’*” [my italics]

Most Christians have no trouble giving glib assent to the idea that the church is ‘family’ – fleshing it out today is a different matter altogether!

CHAPTER IV HOUSE CHURCHES, THE MOST RELEVANT EXPRESSION
OF CHRIST'S BODY IN OUR WORLD TODAY

1. THE HOUSE CHURCH IS BUILT ON SOUND SOCIOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES
2. AN EVALUATION OF AND COMPARISON WITH OTHER SIGNIFICANT APPROACHES TO CHURCH TODAY: THE CELL CHURCH MODEL...
3. THE EMERGING CHURCH...
4. THE ORGANIC CHURCH...
5. CHURCHES WITH SMALL GROUPS...
6. THE SECOND APOSTOLIC MOVEMENT...
7. THE HOUSE CHURCH APPROACH – THE MOST RELEVANT WAY OF BEING CHURCH IN TODAY'S WORLD

1.

THE HOUSE CHURCH IS BUILT ON SOUND SOCIOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES.

Birkey (1988, pp.36-37) points to Paul's involvement in many of the significant tensions of his day, for example he adopted a deliberate policy of accommodation to the varying circumstances in which he found himself. He took cultural mores seriously. This accommodating attitude went far in fostering his understanding of community as living and dynamic. Birkey cites Banks (in 1988, p.37) to the effect that **we should understand Paul's communities in retrospect as *part of a wider social movement toward spontaneous association of persons in society***. At the same time they represented a parallel development to the religious fellowships that were growing in

popularity within Judaism and Hellenism. In the ancient world, two types of traditional communities existed:

- the *polities*: the public life of the city or state...
- the *oikonomia*: the household order into which one was born or to which one was attached...

Unfortunately these associations did not provide for slaves, various dependents, the unmarried, outcasts, etc. Hence increasing numbers of people began to find their desires fulfilled in a variety of voluntary associations which were multiplying, especially in Greek culture. The novel feature of these groups was that individuals from differing social backgrounds were bound together on bases other than race, geography or national legal ties. The operating principle was *koinonia*, a voluntary sharing in partnership. Birkey again cites Banks (in 1988, p.37) as comparing this scenario with Paul's idea of *ekklesia*, encompassing all three of the contemporary human quests:

- The church was a *voluntary association with a small group of like-minded people*, who regularly gathered together. This fulfilled the aspirations for a universal fraternity which Greeks, Romans and Jews all contemplated.
- The church had roots in and thus *took on the character of a household unit*, a community for personal identity and intimacy for which people longed but could seldom find.
- These small church groups were *invested with a supra-national and supra-temporal significance*, common longing felt among the masses.

Birkey (1988, p.38) then goes on to make the point that **the household was the primary structure of the empire** [my emphasis]. Gradually the empire became (with the decline of the old senatorial families of the republic) on a macrocosmic scale what the household was in microcosm. As such it became a complex network of households interlocked into one large system. Birkey (1988, p.39) concludes that the genius of early Christianity, at least in part, was its ability to model itself on an ideal form of the social structure already present in the Roman Empire. Its vitality and success must be

attributed to a large extent to its ability to enable persons to relate to others on all three of the available levels they felt they needed, as listed above.

2.

AN EVALUATION OF AND COMPARISON WITH OTHER SIGNIFICANT CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO CHURCH: *THE 'CELL CHURCH'...*

[NB! Such evaluations and comparisons are necessary in order to show the greater relevance today of the 'house church' compared to the 'cell church,' 'emerging church,' 'organic church,' churches with 'small groups,' etc – one cannot simply ignore the other 'shapes' of churches in existence and being pursued today]

The writer believes that the global *cell church* movement of the last few decades was to a large extent an attempt to remain relevant as churches grew larger numerically, and at the same time a return to some of the basic church principles of the NT. In many ways it has been a validation of the house church principles found in the NT. It arose from churches feeling the need for *fellowship*, although most cell church models saw the purpose of cell groups as two-fold, viz. fellowship and personal evangelism. In dealing with the relevance of church today and the re-emergent house church movement, it is necessary to take an objective look at the *cell church* movement and evaluate it in the light of Scripture.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ It may be worth mentioning that the last church pastored by the writer had given itself over a period of some 13 years to methodically transitioning to a 'cell church,' at one stage having some 35 cell groups with approx. 10 members in each (church membership of approx. 240). It must be said, that whatever the shortcomings of the approach and the mistakes made in the process of transitioning, the local church's most productive years, qualitatively and numerically, was during this period.

2.1.

Background, ethos and definition of the cell church model.

2.1.1.

In the 1970's Richards (cited in Hadaway & Wright & Dubose, 1987,32), among others, expressed the need for congregations to divide into '**growth cells**' which would meet for worship, Bible study and leadership training, etc.

2.1.2.

However it took the massive growth of **Yoido Full Gospel Church** in Seoul, Korea, based on cell groups, in the late 1970's and early 1980's, to 'birth' the cell church idea as we know it today. Many N. American pastors read Pastor Cho's books and followed his basic pattern of small cell group meetings and large celebrations in tandem – churches which implemented this system included Church on the Way in Van Nuys California, Hoffmantown Baptist Church in Albuquerque New Mexico, etc (Hadaway & Wright & DuBose, 1987, p.33).

Then Houston's Second Baptist Church hired Ralph Neighbour Jnr to introduce his design for 'touch point' groups into this large church. Neighbour's design was not identical to the Seoul model but was essentially an elaborated form of the home cell group (1987, pp.33-34). Cho, Neighbour and others expressed their conviction that the *koinonia* of the cell group would lead naturally to evangelistic expression (1987, p.138).

Snyder (2004, pp.181-184) gives some helpful background to the cell church movement. He believes it started with *the recognition, over the past 30 years or so, that healthy, reproducing churches are cellular in structure*. This is a natural implication of the fact that the church really is a socio-spiritual living organism. Most churches had made the mistake of building their life too exclusively around the Sunday worship service. However, Snyder says, when the church is a movement, it has many points of life, energy, initiative, encouragement and reinforcement. The congregation's life can be better expressed through a network of cells and relationships, and *the whole thing* – not just Sunday worship – *is church*. As scriptural base for this understanding Snyder (2004,

p.182) refers to: Acts 5:42; 9:36-43; 16:32; 17:17; 20:20; Romans 16:5, 19; 1 Corinthians 10:3; Hebrews 3:13; 1 Peter 2:16-25. He admits that cell structures are not a cure-all. “Unless the church really understands itself *biblically*, attempts to build a cell-structure can backfire and can actually inoculate a church against a healthy discovery of organic, cellular church life” (2004, p.182).

Snyder (2004, pp.182ff) also points out, quite correctly, that there are *different models of cell churches*, some better and more life-giving than others. The best-known network has developed through the ministry of Neighbour in the USA, Singapore and other parts of the world [including SA]. This movement has shown the power of small, committed circles of believers and the thirst of many for discipleship and evangelism.

2.1.3.

Probably the **best survey of cell churches world-wide and their different models is provided by Comiskey**, who has written extensively on the subject. His recommendation is to extract the *principles* of these growing cell group models around the world, and then implement them contextually in the local church.¹³⁶ In this regard, Comiskey (2002, p.11) has probably published the best analysis of the ‘groups of 12’¹³⁷ cell church approach developed in Bogota, Colombia, by Castellanos, under the auspices of the International Charismatic Mission (ICM). Castellanos’s church exploded numerically as a result of this method wherein 12 people are discipled in a small group, each of whom then in turn go out and find 12 others whom they disciple at the same time, while still continuing to belong to the original mother group. His emphasis was on key strategies for multiplication and successful leadership through the structured ‘government of 12,’ roughly based on Jesus’ discipling of the twelve. This pattern has captivated many people and churches in many nations.

In personal conversation with the writer, Comiskey shared that his ‘favourite’ approach to cell church is that of Elim Church in San Salvador, Central America, which has also seen phenomenal growth via a cell church structure based on Cho’s Korean model,

¹³⁶ Incidentally, over the past 12 years or so the writer has met and spoken with Dr. Comiskey on a number of occasions re cell church. He has always been helpful to writer and his son, Justin Mulder, who spent some 3 years working under his direct mentorship in the planting of Wellspring, a cell church in Moreno Valley, S. California.

¹³⁷ The ‘groups of twelve’ concept is built on Jesus and His ‘group of twelve.’

adjusted to its own nation. Elim has penetrated the entire nation, numbering some 120,000 in the mother church in 2002 (2002, p.10).¹³⁸

In Africa Comiskey (2002, p.10) has also researched the Ivory Coast model of Pastor Dion Robert in his Works and Mission Baptist Church in Abidjan. Robert formed his cells in an African culture which grappled with animism, local cults, etc. In 20 years the church grew to 120,000 members, with branches in France, Denmark and many other nations. One of the highlights of the writer's life was to spend some two weeks with Pastor Robert and experiencing first-hand the life of Christ in this dynamic community.

139

2.2.

Evaluation of the cell church model (from a NT and house church perspective).

2.2.1.

Advantages of the cell church model (many of which are shared by house churches).

Hadaway and Wright and Dubose (1989, p.245) highlighted the *advantages of cell church*:

- Quality of group life: traditional churches make good provision for worship and teaching, while largely ignoring the need for *koinonia*, nurture, fellowship, expression of mutual concern. The cell group provides a place where Christians can come to know each other, neither hurriedly or semi-formally as e.g. in post-service coffee fellowship (1989, p.244).
- Efficient use of lay leaders: Typically in the cell church, regional directors and actual cell leaders tend to be laypersons. Cell group leaders develop their

¹³⁸ Another very clear and comprehensive summary and evaluation of the different forms of cell church and small group is provided by Beckham in his *Where Are We Now? (The Small Group Movement and its Models)*. He evaluates e.g. the Korean model, Groups of 12 model, etc. He is somewhat critical of the G-12 model (pp.153ff) and feels it is based on false assumptions. He also warns against the danger of 'institutionalising' cell church models (e.g. G-12 model) and thus denying future adaptations. Beckham also gives an overview of 'house churches' (pp.156ff): in the writer's opinion, the postmodern house church movement has addressed every one of Beckham's criticisms of the house church, e.g. the 'large group' meeting is now an inbuilt feature of most house church networks (including in the writer's local network in the NMB Metro); e.g. the house church movement in most places networks with more traditional but open-minded churches which are at least serious about the challenges of our day; etc.

¹³⁹ For specific case studies of cell churches in the USA (now somewhat dated), see Hadaway and Wright and DuBose (1987, pp.114ff).

interns, and regular training is provided by cell pastors and even the 'senior pastor.' The cell group has also led to a re-emphasis on the role of 'pastor,' because people in cell groups have a pastor of their own in their cell leader – the latter often knows the cell members better than the senior pastor (1989, p.245).

- Growth potential:
 - A mechanism for neighbourhood evangelism. If groups are designed to grow, multiply and grow again, a church can achieve exponential growth, at least for a while. For this to occur, all cells must have the same goal, viz. to grow and multiply.
 - Greater appeal initially to some segments of the un-churched population. Cells can act as a kind of funnel whereby those uncomfortable with traditional church can begin to worship in a non-threatening situation.

Many others have written eloquently and extensively on the 'positives' of the cell church, e.g. Cho; Neighbour; Beckham; Stockstill; Kreider; Khong; Boren; etc. Herewith a list of the *benefits of cell church* through the eyes of Comiskey (1999, pp.67ff) [again, house churches share in most of these benefits]:

- a) Evangelism that results in both salvation and sanctification (1999, pp.67-69). Comiskey cites the general failure of 'evangelism programs,' 'follow-up,' etc. He sees personal salvation and sanctification occurring naturally in the cell.
- b) New members have a place to belong (1999, pp.69-70). Cells work against losing members through the 'back door' due to a lack of intimacy and belonging.
- c) Effective pastoring that shares responsibility (1999, pp.71). The day of the 'one-man-show' is over, and most pastors realize they can only get the job of pastoring done by working through others. Essentially, the rancher (pastor) cares for the shepherds (cell leaders), who care for the sheep.
- d) Competent counselling that utilizes laypeople (1999, pp.73-74). Cell leaders become counsellors, who can deal with many of the less serious counselling issues.

- e) Efficient administration that simplifies ministry (1999, pp.74-76). Church administration is overseen through the cell system. For example, cell-zones (groups of cells under a zone pastor) can oversee the ushering system, Sunday School, nursery, etc.
- f) Facilitation of New Testament Christianity (1999, pp.76-80). That is, the vital life and community of NT Christianity: the church is perceived/experienced as ‘the family of God’ (Eph. 2:14-15), ‘body of Christ’ (1 Cor. 12:12-26), ‘people of God’ (2 Thess. 2:13-14).

For the writer, one of the most helpful things about the cell church approach was to have a more biblical church as far as early church principles were concerned. The cell church model also provided a kind of basic ‘skeleton’ (see point (e) above) on which to hang the more vital aspects of church life, ensuring that ‘the main thing remained the main thing.’

2.2.2.

Disadvantages of the cell church model.

Hadaway and Wright and DuBose (1987, pp.247ff) have listed some *potential disadvantages of the cell church model*:

- While church cell groups have not been nearly as threatening to churches and pastors as house churches, they have caused conflict with already existing programs and institutions of churches [in the writer’s opinion, maybe not a bad thing]. This conflict has manifested itself in a competition for leaders, lack of ownership, low participation by older members, etc.
- The possibility of splintering. It is possible for members to become so attached to their new leaders and cell groups that they want to break away to form independent groups. [this can be avoided]

- The possibility of theological drift. There is the possibility of a cell group leader pursuing some theological tangent in conflict with the doctrinal stance of the host church. [again, this can be avoided]¹⁴⁰
- Cell division or ‘multiplication’ after mere months is not always experienced as a pleasant plan of action for members who have developed deep relationships in their groups (1987, p.101).

According to R and J Banks (1998, p.106), proponents of house church, the cell church model **interprets the structure of the early church too much in terms of an organisational grid that reflects a 20th century [business/corporate] managerial mindset.** Although leadership is described as non-specialist and non-hierarchical, each group (typically) has a specified leader, every cluster of 5 cell groups has a higher leader, and a congregation of 25 groups or more has a still higher leader or pastor. Though the language of servant-leadership is used, all positions of responsibility are seen as ‘offices.’ In contrast to the ‘program base design’ of most congregations, which is built up in yet another managerial fashion, around a hierarchy of specialists, committees, and organisations, the cell group church describes itself as a ‘people base design.’ While to some extent we all tend to read our own ideas and frameworks into the biblical accounts, the precise numbers and organisational grid attached to this reconstruction does this in an observable, somewhat managerial, way. The model moves away from a hierarchical view of leadership, but the focus on the leader and leader intern in the individual cells and on zone leaders who look after a cluster of cells (plus zone pastors over them, and district pastors over the zone pastors) suggests a vertical chain of authority that is different in character to the early Christian approach, with its emphasis on more fluid and less status-conscious approaches to leadership.

¹⁴⁰ Avoiding things like splintering, theological drift, etc. in house churches are dealt with in chapter V, where we handle the most commonly-raised objections to the house church and answer in some detail. Even the emergence of episcopacy was no guarantee against things like divisions, heresy, etc – these things cannot be ‘controlled’ hierarchically.

Furthermore, according to R and J Banks (1998, p.106), in contrast to the NT testimony and biblical house churches today, *cell churches function* differently:

- Cells normally meet for about 90 minutes only, and are far more task-orientated. Cell churches aim to grow new groups every four to six months, so they change rapidly and allow little time for deep relationships to build.¹⁴¹
- When there are sufficient cells to form a congregational network, people are often redistributed into new groups, further weakening the communal bonds they need to develop.
- In *some* cell churches, children and teenagers in cells are regarded more as onlookers rather than full participants. Sometimes they may have separate cell groups altogether, missing out on the intergenerational enrichment and edification of house churches and other small groups.
- The house church, by contrast, is less that of a cell or an organisation and more that of a *family* (1998, pp.115-116). This affects how we approach goals, duration of life, size and the nature of its leadership. The role of forgiveness, the centrality of love, and the presence of spiritual gifts add a dimension that is not always present in more formulaic approaches.
- Often in cell churches there can be an over-reliance on written manuals and too self-conscious an employment of techniques for developing relationships, making the process too formal and artificial. It is not that leadership manuals and studies of group dynamics have nothing to offer; it is just that their insights should be drawn in to illumine, not direct, what is happening (1998, p.123).

Prior (1985, p.79), author and pastor who organised St. John's Parish in Wynberg on a fascinating 'house church' basis in the 1970's, rightly pointed out, then already, **the lack of church members who had genuine friendships with people outside of the church**, a basic weakness of the cell church approach. [certainly in the writer's experience of cell church - it was this factor, probably more than anything else, which

¹⁴¹ This was the writer's experience in the cell church he pastored – there was too much pressure time-wise, and some members eventually simply couldn't keep up the pace, leading to some disillusionment and drop-out.

put a kind of ‘ceiling’ on exponential growth during the ‘cell church’ phase of his last pastorate (1982-2006)].

Snyder (2004, p.183) in many ways favours cell church, but points out *two difficulties*:

- That of *integrating children* into the cell structure and the fact that many adults were not fulfilling the expectation that everyone would, in effect, be an evangelist, bringing others into the cells.
- *A lack of sufficient structural flexibility* – churches need to adapt structures to their particular contexts, without compromising on basic biblical teachings about church life and discipleship. Snyder points out that the idea that every member will be an evangelist within the cell structure is really a misunderstanding of biblical discipleship, for it ignores God-given diversity in gifts, etc.

Frost & Hirsch (2003, p.212), speaking on the pioneering church being an ‘organic’ community (i.e. remaining true to its essence rather than becoming mechanically structured), refers to the *somewhat mechanical structuring* in cell church where cells remain a part of a larger, highly administered and programmed local church. They add, “the cell group in this system can easily become a form of pseudo-community filling in the loss of the sense of broader community as the church grows beyond its optimum size... There is no doubt that the larger the system grows in terms of membership, the more machinelike and inorganic its systems, structures and social patterns will tend to become.”

Boren (2007, p.6), ¹⁴² writing on his disillusionment with the cell church model [he was at the heart of the cell church movement in the 1990’s and early 2000’s], says,

“I also saw how small groups had been turned into a program rather than a way of facilitating organic missionality... Good old American pragmatism has

¹⁴² See Boren’s excellent *Making Cell Groups Work*: 2002.

turned small groups into a modernistic program that leaders could control and produce growth ... they had little to do with mission and brought little radical transformation.” As a result of his continued journey, he strongly emphasises that “Small group community is crucial to the future of the church.”¹⁴³

Kreider (2000), who in the past has also been at the heart of the cell church movement [and more recently favours the house church approach], highlights *the need for greater depth in relationality*. He wrote *The Cry for Spiritual Fathers and Mothers*, drawing on such scriptures as 1 Kings 19 (Elijah and Elisha), Malachi 4:6, 1 Corinthians 4:15 (many ‘guides’ but few ‘fathers’), 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12, etc, calling for the restoration of spiritual family connections and challenging believers to have and become ‘spiritual fathers and mothers’ in terms of personal mentoring (not in any kind of legalistic or controlling way) to help us reach maturity in Christ. Commenting on Psalm 68:6, Kreider (2000, p.133) warns,

“Churches that have embarked on cell ministry without understanding and living out spiritual fathering have only started another religious cell group program. The church is built through our Lord Jesus Christ by God-ordained relationships. In Psalm 68:6 the Lord tells us he is placing ‘the lonely in families’ (NIV). The Lord is restoring spiritual parenting to the church today to meet the needs of lonely new believers, lonely church members, lonely small group leaders, and lonely pastors.”¹⁴⁴ [Kreider (2000, pp.133ff) then lists a number of practical examples from his own experience; he also relates this principle to the absence of fathers in society today, and the resulting societal problems (2000, pp.14-15). Such care in the church

¹⁴³ Boren understands (2007, p.10) that N. American culture is in the midst of massive shifts, especially in relation to structures, programs, etc - the church at large is beginning to think more theologically and biblically about small group structures. The subtitle for his book, *The Relational Way*, reads ‘*From Small Group Structures to Holistic Life Connections*.’ He concludes (p.16) that in N. America small groups for community’s sake has been turned into a fast-food approach, which has resulted in a fast-food, do-it-yourself, individualised faith – often without the ‘breath of the Spirit’ (Ezek. 37).

¹⁴⁴ The writer has found this principle and practice most useful in the house churches he facilitates.

happens in the building of mentoring relationships in the small group, NOT in a class room (2000, p.38).¹⁴⁵

We **conclude** *this assessment of cell church*, in the light of the Scriptures and the biblical house church, by listing (in summary form) Simson’s **13 distinctions between cell church and house church**, the latter being based more naturally and scripturally in his view (1998, pp.130-155) (before doing this, Simson makes clear that he is grateful to the cell church movement [as is the writer]: “I clearly see the hand of God in the cell-church and related movements. I believe God is the prime initiator of a paradigm shift and resulting changes in terms of church of such radical and global proportions that many of us would be simply shocked or startled, if we were to see the whole picture. I myself readily agree that what I write here is only a small part of the whole truth, and needs the complementary work and input of many others”):

Core Differences	Cell Church	House Church
a. philosophy	‘Chiefdom’	<i>acephalous</i> /headless tribe
b. reflects	city culture	village culture
c. flourishes in	warrior nations	peaceful nations also
d. cell is	part of a larger unit	the unit itself
e. administration	Jethro system	fivefold ministry
f. programme	agenda-driven	house church the agenda
g. structure	pyramid	flat
h. leadership	leaders’ ladder	elders and apostles
i. centre	headquartered	decentralised
j. celebration	must	optional
k. visibility	high	low
l. set-up	evangelistic	apostolic and prophetic
m. ‘big wing’ is	denominational church	the city church

¹⁴⁵ To the writer’s mind, this is also the weakness of the traditional Sunday School approach.

Herewith Simson's explanations of some of the above:

- House churches thrive in both villages and cities, whereas cell churches tend to develop predominantly in cities.
- Some tribes are traditionally 'warriors,' like the African Masai, the Japanese, or the Norwegian Vikings, while others have a more peaceful mindset and history like the Dravidians of S. India, the Finns, Kalahari Bushmen, etc. (People growing up in a 'warrior' culture will much more expect and accept that others tell them what to do and how to behave. People growing up with a peaceful, democratic, socialist or even communist background have much in common with today's 'Generation X' culture in the West – they will instinctively question any self-imposing authority, be it political, economic or spiritual)
- Jethro administration is based on the delegation of authority to several levels of leadership – see Jethro's advice to Moses in Exodus 18. By contrast, the house church is overseen by elders who are in relationship with people gifted in the five-fold ministry of Ephesians 4, through which God empowers, anoints and encourages others to do the work of the ministry.
- House churches can thrive when large-scale celebrations are not permissible or practical, e.g. under persecution of the church.
- Many have correctly understood that the cell church is an evangelistic model for the church – they agree that 'evangelism is the need of the hour.' However, the long-term driving force of a church is not its evangelistic vision, but a solid apostolic and prophetic foundation based e.g. on Ephesians 2:20.
- It was Beckham who introduced the helpful cell church picture of a bird which obviously needs two wings to fly: the one wing is the cell structure, the other wing is the worship/teaching service. It is this metaphor that Simson has in mind under point 'm.'

3.

EVALUATION OF AND COMPARISON WITH OTHER SIGNIFICANT, CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO CHURCH: *THE EMERGING CHURCH...*

[reminder: we are dealing with these other contemporary ‘shapes’ of church in order to demonstrate the greater relevance of the house church approach]

Some of its emphases cannot be ignored [by the traditional church and the contemporary house church movement – personal comment] when talking seriously about the church.

3.1.

Introduction to the emerging church model.

It has been said that the movement is more a *mindset* than a *model* (citation of Kimball in R. Smith, 2007, p.5). Smith (2007, p.1) goes on to say that

“The Emerging Church Movement is a new expression of the ancient roots of our Christian faith, and community is the master key to its desire to sense and share the Lord in ‘non-traditional’ ways. It consists of believers who are endeavouring to understand the post-modern worldview, critique it through a biblical lens and harness it in order to articulate the story of Jesus Christ in ways that can touch the soul of emerging generations... It has grown out of a *mindset* that desires to find new ways of engaging our post-modern culture with the timeless and powerful message of the Gospel like the Apostle Paul did for *his* time and audience (Acts 17:22-31).”

3.2.

So much has been written on this subject that the writer has chosen to select one of the foremost leaders of emerging church, viz. Brian McLaren.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ The writer had the privilege of meeting with Brian McLaren and hearing him speak on a number of occasions. He impressed the writer each time as a humble and gracious servant of God, with a razor-sharp mind, as well as a passion for a church that is relevant in our times. The writer is not therefore saying that he would agree with everything McLaren says and writes, e.g. his seeming contradictions on ‘objective truth.’

He writes (2000, pp.13-14,16) that even the agnostic can see that it is time for a new kind of church in the world. We have to change, but that is not easy – especially changing behaviour and organisation.

Again we will have to be selective – let us outline from his *The Church on the Other Side* (2000, 'Contents') his **13 principles/strategies for churches that wish to engage postmodern society**, then briefly comment on areas with which the simple/house church movement would agree or disagree [in the opinion of the writer]:

- a) *Maximise discontinuity*. Distinguish between renewed, restored, and reinvented churches, and focus on the latter. ¹⁴⁷ Established churches are increasingly ineffective (2000, p.21). McLaren (2000, pp.22-23) comments, the NT church is not a fixed blueprint for all cultures.
- b) *Redefine your mission*. The writer appreciates McLaren's (2004, pp.34ff) emphasis on authentic missional *community & disciple-making* – the church is indeed suffering from individualism and needs to learn from Jesus' kingdom-understanding of the communal, familial and social. He (2000:28-29) surely rightly asks, what happened in Rwanda, the most Christianised nation in Africa at the time? Are we religious (Pharisees) or Christian?
- c) *Practise systems thinking*. See the church program in terms of interrelated systems rather than quick fixes. Despite our diversities, we enjoy common systems and sociologies.
- d) *Trade up your traditions for tradition*. Distinguish between church traditions and the Christian Tradition, and move emphasis from the former to the latter [we have noted the danger of traditionalism, denominationalism, institutionalism, etc]. Integrate public and private morality (2000, p.60).

¹⁴⁷ According to McLaren (2000, pp.21-24) (a) The 'renewed church' is an old church that, after having lost touch with its own people, goes through a process of change in order to relate to them and better meet their needs. This is good. But renewal tends to be a temporary, or stopgap, measure. (b) The 'restored church' looks at problems in the churches today and says 'we have lost our way and must get back to the NT.' Unfortunately this church tends to get bogged down with some peripheral matter of early church life, e.g. 'speaking in tongues,' 'footwashing,' etc. (c) The 'reinvented church' goes through a process of peripheral changes similar to the renewed and restored church, a process of radical self-assessment, of going back to roots, sources and first things. But the new church does not try to draft a new blueprint. It comes up with a new philosophy of ministry, discovers 'new paradigms,' seeking not only new wineskins but new wine. It is born again as a new church – in doing so the church has maximized discontinuity.

- e) *Resurrect theology as art and science.* Stop thinking of theology as a matter of technical training, in which answers are already known, and rejuvenate theology through a quest for truth and beauty. The old systems are ‘tired,’ we need a new ‘mere Christianity’ (2000, pp.68,71). Theology is never ‘finished.’ [While McLaren (2000, p.70) concludes that *knowing* ‘objective truth is not possible,’ and we understand the subjectivity that governs us all, the writer would rather take the approach of Schaeffer in his many books ¹⁴⁸ which argue for the pursuit of ‘objective truth’ and make the point that without such (and the possibility of knowing it – by grace!) the world is compass-less and hopeless]. [Anderson, in a book with foreword by McLaren, cites Penner’s warning (cited in 2006, p.9) about turning toward a postmodern construct of reality that *empties truth of any objective content*: “I am concerned that Christians who accept the postmodern turn be careful not to become complicitous with certain forms of the postmodern turn that makes a reactionary move toward subjectivity, which empties if of the possibility of asserting anything as true”].
- f) *Design a new apologetic.* Find fresh ways to communicate the gospel to the post-modern mind. We would, I am sure, agree with evangelicalism’s dependence on reasoning, defensiveness, combativeness, dishonest (exaggerated claims, etc), and so on. There is need to offer not only answers but also mysteries, focus on the essentials, reason winsomely, understand that conversion is not merely a ‘decision’ but ‘a process’ (2000, pp.78ff). [Here the house church is helpful if used scripturally and sensibly, e.g. in walking a road with new believers in the pursuit of maturity].
- g) *Learn a new rhetoric.* Realise that old communication patterns are less and less effective in the new world, and discover new, appropriate modes of discourse. Minimise ‘religious language,’ simplify things, recognise the power of ‘story,’ words must be accompanied by deeds, etc. [The writer, in house church planting, has experienced the value of these guidelines].

¹⁴⁸ See Schaeffer’s renowned *Escape from Reason, The God Who is There, How Should We Then Live? The Great Evangelical Disaster, True Spirituality*, etc.

- h) *Abandon structures as they are outgrown.* Adopt a new paradigm for church structure that allows for routine reengineering based on changes in size, constituency, resources, and strategy. The writer would agree with McLaren (2000, pp.95ff) when he calls for a new ecclesiology that fits churches of various sizes and encourages church growth but disagree when he criticises ‘simple church’ as falling prey to well-intentioned but impractical idealism – while this could/does sometimes happen in the house church context, it is a danger that *all* churches must guard against. [It seems that here McLaren does what he criticizes, viz. stereo-typing. Certainly McLaren (2006, p.107) makes sense when he calls for an ecclesiology that is streamlined, *simple*, less exhausting and time consuming].
- i) *Save the leaders.* Recognise the terrible toll that this transition time is taking on leaders; recognize their immense value to the church at this time; help them to be ‘saved’ for their needed work. We need a new breed of leaders with authenticity, team-play, etc (2006, pp.112ff).¹⁴⁹
- j) *Subsume missions in mission.* Understand the crisis in world missions, and help launch a new missionary movement (2006, pp.121ff). Denominationalism is dying, supporting churches are struggling and pre-occupied with themselves, there is the moral decay brought on by secularism, missionaries are facing nominalism at home and on the field, etc. We now have resort to (2006, pp.133ff): good project design/ planning, raising money in new ways, thinking outside of the box, focussing on children, looking outward as churches, church-planting on ‘the other side,’ etc.
- k) *Look ahead, farther ahead.* Anchor your hope in the future rather than in the past, and explore a new eschatology. The only approach that will work on the long haul is an *incarnational* one, for God is in solidarity with our world, everything affects everything in the world, etc (2006, p.148). [We have already noted the incarnational nature of house church].

¹⁴⁹ Hardly a month goes by that the writer is not in dialogue with pastors and leaders who are suffering terribly in an institutional church system which often uses a leader, only to cast him/her aside when challenged to transition church in these transitional times.

- l) *Enter the postmodern world:* (i) Understand it... Understand postmodernism, and learn to see it from the inside. Today the robed priest represents traditional culture, the scientist represents modernism, and the rock musician represents post-modernity (2006, pp.162ff). Some of the core-values of postmodernity include scepticism as regards certainty about anything, group-experience and being together with others [see here the value of small groups and house churches], valuation of subjective experience, etc. McLaren (2006, pp.166ff) rubbishes what he sees as two myths re post-moderns: that they don't believe in absolute truth or don't care about truth [somewhat contradictory to what indicated earlier?] – rather they doubt our ability to know absolute truth and communicate it, they doubt 'absolute knowledge.'
- m) *Enter the postmodern world:* (ii) engage it... Engage postmodernism, and maximise the opportunities it presents. [The writer loves Petersen's paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 9:19ff (referred to in McLaren, 2006, p.168), '*I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ – but I entered their world to experience things from their point of view*']. As to engaging post-modernism, McLaren (2006, pp.172ff) has some helpful guidelines, e.g. see truth and goodness where these exist in post-modernism, magnify the importance of faith, be fair in criticism, focus more on the experiential, listen to peoples' stories and tell them yours, avoid coercion into a 'decision,' minister to their breakdown in family life [note relevance of house church here], engage the arts in communicating the message, re-assert the value of community & rekindle experience of it (2006, pp.181,183ff). McLaren cites Newbigin (in 2006, pp.183ff) in asserting that the greatest apologetic for the gospel is and always has been *a community that actually lives the gospel ... All evangelistic methods have power to accomplish their purpose "only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community. Jesus... did not write a book but formed a community."*
- n) *Enter the postmodern world:* (iii) get ready for revolution... Prepare to de-bug your faith from the viruses of modernity. Exchange the 'conquest and control virus' for that of 'collaboration and empowerment' (2006, pp.189ff). Get rid of the 'mechanistic' virus, i.e. 'assembly-line' spiritual growth; the 'reductionist' virus

that reduces Christianity to propositions only; the ‘secular/scientific’ virus, because people also need ‘mystery;’ the virus of ‘individualism;’ the virus of ‘organisationalism;’ the virus of consumerism’ because the church must move from institutionalism and being purveyor of religious goods and services to an authentic, missional community. [interestingly, the writer’s experience in house church planting has been that new believers are sometimes less-consumerist than traditional, churched ones – therefore build with the former ¹⁵⁰]. Thus shun bickering over trivia, make room for messy and creative thinkers, be gracious, be hopeful about the future (Christ is building His church), don’t get distracted (it is essentially about Christ and His kingdom), etc (2006, pp.198ff).

- o) *Add to this list.* Help your church become a learning organization that discovers and implements its own strategies. Simplify, simplify (avoid Pharisaic rules and regulations), simplify! (2006, p.205)

3.3.

A globally-recognized representation and evaluation of the emerging church model (according to McLaren himself), viz. Gibbs’ and Bolger’s *Emerging Churches* (2005).

The authors (2005, pp.43ff) identify, from within the movement, **3 core practices, leading to 6 common practices. We detail what we can learn from these, also noting, from time to time, certain ‘overlaps’ with today’s house church movement, not only in structure but in relevance.**

3.3.1.

‘CORE’ AND ‘COMMON’ PRACTICES OF EMERGING CHURCHES.

First ‘core’ practice: identifying with Jesus.

¹⁵⁰ One of the reasons for Christians’ consumerism may be the way the Gospel has been ‘marketed’ by many church leaders and preachers – God is there to satisfy the existing or prospective church member at all times. The member thus tends to develop the mentality that if one church doesn’t meet my precise needs, I go to the next... ‘Join OUR church – we cater for more...’ The writer is aware, in his home city, of many Christians, in his (until recently) own denomination, who have traded churches for just about every other church of this denomination in town! Others have resorted to other denominational/non-denominational churches, where ‘the show is bigger and better.’

In essence it is not about a mission or a message but about JESUS (2005, pp.47ff). It is about His kingdom and glory. The 'gospel of the kingdom' transcends all church forms – it is not about church structure (although important) but about a way of life with Jesus, exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount. It's about *kingdom-type communities* [my emphasis], for Jesus didn't come to plant churches but rather to create communities that reflected the King and His kingdom (2005, pp.59-61).

Second 'core' practice: transforming secular space.

There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, as is shown in the *incarnation* of Jesus (2005, pp.65ff). We have to tear down the sacred/secular divide, for as the kingdom interacts with culture all of life becomes sacred. For example, emerging churches will use secular music and sacralise it (2005, pp.70ff) [is that not what Charles Wesley did with the pub-songs of his day?]. Modernity separated transcendence and immanence, post-modernity doesn't (2005, p.72).

Emerging churches face 2 dangers (2005, p.88): (a) if they err with regard to culture, the church dies; (b) if they err with regard to the gospel, the church loses its identity. Working against these dangers are (2005, p.88): (a) the gospel; (b) sacralisation; (c) community.

Third 'core' practice: living as community.

This affirms that the kingdom produces community, not vice versa (2005, p.91). Hence we also have to re-define the meaning of 'church' (2005, pp.96ff) (some examples):

- as family versus institution.
- as people versus a place.
- as a place of mutual accountability.
- as a movement on a mission.

Emerging churches consist of *decentralised communities, i.e. small groups and networks of small groups* (2005, p.109) ('networks of the infected'). *Small groups are the essential meeting of the church, i.e. groups of 8-15 people, with 25-40 the upper limit.*

Emerging churches have no desire to grow large, rather they strive to reproduce. Such small communities relate to each other by a common *vision*.

Fourth 'common' practice: welcoming the stranger.

Modernism, because it often separated the sacred and the secular, tended toward exclusivism (2005, pp.117ff): people tended to group with those who were similar, perhaps in culture, social standing, economic standing, etc [some paid the highest price under this system, e.g. the holocaust – we could add apartheid]. Post-modernism tends to release control and grant more freedom in association, etc. Gibbs and Bolger (2005, pp.119ff) go on to cite some very helpful pointers with regard to the latter [the writer is being selective here]:

- Give more regular place to the eucharist, celebrate with *agape* meals.
- Hospitality must move from the periphery to a central practice ('see Christ' in people coming through the door, according to Mt. 25).
- Welcome those who are 'different,' i.e. theologically and otherwise.
- Move from a perceived arrogance to a transparent humility.
- Move from an 'agenda' to a 'Holy Spirit agenda' (don't 'market' God).
- Move from speaking about grace to grace speaking through our lives.
- Move from a privatised faith to a public faith.

Fifth 'common' practice: serving with generosity.

Striving for the kingdom leads to generosity, because the kingdom is generous (2005, pp.135ff). Here we join God in pouring out His love. Consumerism in the church destroys community and creates greed, but the kingdom comes as a gift.

Gibbs and Bolger (2005, pp.140ff) make the important point that kingdom-activity must never be divorced from its roots, viz. Christ and the gospel: otherwise we end up with the old 'social gospel' which at the end of the day is content-less and powerless. Rather we must move from social programs to a socially-engaged way of life, with a bottom-up rather than top-down approach (we see the latter in paternalism) (2005, pp.42ff). We must exchange a 'spiritualised gospel' for an 'embodied gospel.' Governments' often

superficial social programs don't address the deep-rooted problems of people – we need to create an alternate culture where God can work.

Sixth 'common' practice: participating as producers.

To take one example: there is a dissatisfaction with worship restricted to the guitarist and the preacher – participatory and indigenous worship is needed.

Note (2005, p.156) how participatory the NT church was: everyone seemed to have space and a voice at a meeting (1 Cor. 14) (remember, NT churches were generally small – hence the helpfulness of meeting in homes most of the time). Thus for example (2005, pp.167ff), when emerging churches grow larger, they create house churches, meeting in the larger group mainly for communion. These house churches then take turns in leading the larger gatherings in worship.

Again Gibbs and Bolger add some excellent pointers for achieving the aim of participation and production (2005, pp.158ff), of which the writer selects a few:

- Members take personal responsibility for a worship service.
- Incorporate flexibility.
- Each person gets, some time or another, to share their 'story.'
- Replace the sermon (monologue) with inter-action (dialogue).
- Foster openness and vulnerability.
- Include all ages in worship [so many of these things are easier in a house church setting].
- Embrace transcendence and immanence in services.

Seventh 'common' practice: creating as created beings.

God's people are involved with His redemptive purpose, therefore also with Him as Creator, utilising all of His creation (2005, pp.173ff). Christians must touch all things, beautify all things. Because we are created in God's image, creativity is a core-value to Christians.

Therefore we need to create 'a theology of creativity' (2005, pp.175ff). For example, in the matter of worship, we create worship rather than consume it. Creativity gives worshippers opportunity to embrace aspects of God's character we would not normally

acknowledge (2005, pp.177ff). Such creativity in worship and in play must always reflect the glory of God.

We can help this process by (2005, pp.179ff):

- Creating a climate of creativity.
- Bring what you already have.
- Sometimes use light-hearted playfulness (balances emotional intensity).
- Use rituals involving banners, candles, incense, symbols, narratives, etc.
- use technology but don't become obsessed with it (people and relationships are more important).

Eight 'common' practice: leading as a body.

Modernity's understanding of leadership was largely that of managing and all kinds of controls (CEO's, etc), whereas post-modernity is more facilitative of space for all (2005, pp.192ff).

Gibbs and Bolger (2005, pp.192ff), writing on 'Jesus, the Kingdom and Modernity' claim that in the NT there are no 'patriarchs' – this position/function is reserved for God alone, and Jesus heads up any community under God. There is no hierarchy in the Trinity. The only legitimate mode of kingdom-leadership is that of persuasion (2005, p.192). Such an approach results in the following [a selection]:

- Stifling control is exchanged for creative freedom.
- The vision of the leader gives way to the vision of all.
- Leadership based on willingness gives way to leadership based on giftings.
- Authority based on position gives way to influence based on track-record.
- Centralised, high control approach gives way to relational, de-centralised approach (the authors point out that a controlling style is more masculine: 2005, p.209).
- Instead of CEO's you have spiritual directors.
- Instead of a 'staff approach' you have a volunteer approach.

Ninth 'common' practice: merging ancient and contemporary spiritualities.

Whereas modernity created secular space, post-modernity brings pervasive spirituality (2005, pp.217ff). [Rightly so – personal comment] The emerging church is not entranced with the modern church's hyper-activity.

The emerging church's roots are found in the following (2005, pp.219ff):

- 'Third Wave Charismatics' rather than classic Pentecostalism with the latter's insistence on *glossalalia* as evidence of the 'baptism of the Spirit.'
- Ancient spiritualities engaging the mind and the body, e.g. contemplative spirituality, Celtic spirituality, Monastic spirituality involving daily disciplines and mutual accountability, simplicity of lifestyle, sending out of teams to establish new communities, etc.
- Integrating tradition and contemporary culture, e.g. liturgy must relate to the pain and 'angst' of our world.
- Fostering a worshipful way of life, which would include eating, drinking and recreating together.
- Ensuring that our church structures don't work against engaging with culture: thus some groups meet in cafes, pubs, etc [in many cases our church structures keep us away from people where/as they are] (2005, pp.232ff).
- Most emerging churches avoid false spiritualities, e.g. that of the New Age Movement.

Gibbs and Bolger (2005, pp.239ff) include an *appendix* recording **the stories of 50 emerging church leaders, across the spectrum, giving one some idea of the diversity of the movement and yet the commonalities. The authors also relate significantly how many of the emerging churches have adopted 'a kind of house church approach,' including the following:**

- A significant and growing number of churches on the front lines of mission in Europe, N. America and Australia. Most of these emerging churches are new. Some of these frontline churches are large (several hundreds/thousands of members), "but *the majority are small, consisting of independent groups of*

less than thirty or clusters of house groups totalling less than one hundred”
[my emphasis] (2005, p.29).

- Thus, for example, the network of house churches (about 25 house churches) led by Joe Boyd of Apex, Las Vegas, who had been involved in ‘successful’ mega-churches. They are now family/kingdom/Jesus-oriented, with a family/kingdom theology. They are vitally befriending un-churched people. They network with other similar bodies throughout the world (2005. pp.195, 246-248). Other examples of *emerging churches meeting as house churches* (my emphasis) include:
 - Rachelle Mee-Chapman and ‘Thursday PM’ in Seattle, with an arts and ‘neo-Monastic’ leaning (2005, p.180).
 - Brad Cecil of Axxess in Arlington, Texas (2005, pp.167-168). They decentralised their unwieldy group to a network of house churches for the sake of effectiveness. Other such groups include Eternity in Bracknell, UK; Quest in Seattle; Vintage Faith in Santa Cruz, California.
 - Kevin Rains of Vineyard Central in Cincinnati (2005, pp.296-297) mentions how for him, as ardent-supporter of cell church, it did not take things far enough, so they transitioned to house churches.
 - Aaron Norwood of the Bridge, Phoenix (2005, pp.292-293). They resorted to house churches in a Southern Baptist context, and as a largely student network they now reach into the local university as well as poverty-stricken communities with food and clothing.
 - Jason Evans of Matthew’s House, Vista, California (2005, pp.268-269). They moved from a larger ‘seeker friendly’ type meeting to gathering in house churches, planting other house churches and networking with isolated house churches needing such a fellowship.
 - Jonathan Campbell, working in Seattle (2005, pp.254-256). He and his wife felt caught up in a mere ‘organisation.’ A year after starting their first church they replaced the large weekly celebrations with simple gatherings in homes, apartments and businesses. Then they planted a church in Seattle, from the base of a business, leading a network of house churches

which operate *as simply as possible so as to not miss the leading of the Holy Spirit*, all this with success and much greater fulfilment. The lesson they learned was *the more structured, the less Spirit* [my emphasis].¹⁵¹

AN EVALUATION OF AND COMPARISON WITH OTHER SIGNIFICANT, CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO CHURCH: ‘THE ORGANIC CHURCH’ MODEL OF NEIL COLE...¹⁵²

4.1.

What is ‘organic church’ according to Cole?

Some years ago, Cole, a N. American, pioneered an approach to being/doing church today which he called *organic church*. As the subtitle of his book on this subject indicates, it is about ‘growing faith where life happens.’ His approach was born when he realised that the modern church, no matter how ‘dolled-up’ with revised vision statements, ‘hipper worship,’ livelier sermons, contemporary music, bigger and better auditoriums, etc, has a basic flaw – it is not connecting with many younger and older people where they *are*, i.e. those who would never think to ‘go to church’ [the house church movement, in the writer’s opinion, identifies with many of these sentiments]. Thus Cole felt we must go where people congregate. This led him to a renewed study of the Scriptures, which in turn encouraged him to return to the ancient roots of our faith and ‘sowing the seeds of organic growth’ according to NT, kingdom principles. It would appear that Cole’s approach has prospered as he and others like him have watched faith develop and spreading in the most unlikely places. It is, according to Cole, about planting new expressions of the kingdom of God.¹⁵³

Cole deals with five key aspects of church life – for our purposes we will deal only with the first three, the most basic to his understanding of the church. [The other

¹⁵¹ For further evaluations of the Emerging Church Movement, see helpful articles by Donahue (2007, pp.1-2), R. Smith (2007, pp.1-5), and Mack (2007, pp.7ff).

¹⁵² See Cole’s *Organic Church*.

¹⁵³ It is interesting to note here Latourette’s reference (1953, p.99) to John Chrysostom’s promotion of chapels in fields and vineyards where people were at work, etc, based on his conviction that the most effective tool for conversion was Christian living.

two aspects Cole deals with are: *The Epidemic Kingdom and How It Spreads; The Call to Organic Church*]:

A. *Roots of the Organic Church* (2005, pp.1-57). A key-scripture for Cole is Matthew 16:13-20, beginning with the question 'Who is the Christ?' and the answer following – for Cole it is here that the church begins. He then goes on to speak of 'Church according to Jesus' (2005, pp.7-15):

- Jesus Builds the Church
- Jesus Owns the Church
- The Church Is Meant to Be Growing
- The Church That Is Growing Will Face Opposition
- The Church That Jesus Builds Is Unstoppable

B. *Organic Nature of the Kingdom of God* (2005, pp.58-105). Jesus used organic metaphors to describe the Kingdom of God in ways we could understand. Thus we must unlock the meaning of His parables in order to understand the properties of the Kingdom that cause it to spread in influence so as to transform the world. Cole then takes three parables from Mark chapter 4 as study material, to see how the Kingdom starts, grows, and multiplies:

- The Parable of *the Sower*. This is where it all starts, with good seed and good soil.
- The Parable of *the Growing Seed*. The principle here is mentioned by Paul in I Corinthians 3:6, 'I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow,' i.o.w. ultimately *God* is responsible for the growth of the seed/His Kingdom. We are but God's fellow-workers. According to Cole (2005, pp.88-89), "We need to let go of the ring of power and control if we want to be free and see God work... Human control and spontaneous reproduction are not compatible."
- The Parable of *the Mustard Seed*. Cole (2005, p.97) calls this 'The Parable of Starting Small and Growing Large.' He defines the basic unit of Kingdom life as "a follower of Christ in relationship with another follower of

Christ. The micro form of church is a unit of two or three believers in relationship” (2005, pp.99ff). [Cole feels that the ‘cell church cell’ and the house church unit is too large and not flexible enough (2005, pp.99ff)].

C. *From the Microscope to the Telescope* (2005, pp.107-140). The principle Cole works with here he bases on the fact that all living things have *DNA*. The Body of Christ is no different; it also has *DNA*. To better understand how a living thing works, it is imperative to understand how its living cells operate (2005, p.107). Cole links all this with the image of the Church as the ‘body of Christ.’ In Cole’s words, “The intent is to take a microscope to the Body of Christ and discover where life happens on a molecular level. We then discover how the Kingdom expands from the microscopic to a global telescopic view of a worldwide epidemic movement’ (2005, p.107) – hence the title of his next major section, ‘The Epidemic Kingdom and How It Spreads’ (2005, pp.141ff). ‘Spreading the epidemic’ takes place via “Jesus’ Plan to Spread the Kingdom” (2005, p.173) - this includes:

- a) *The Practice of Prayer* (Lk. 10:2; Mt. 10:38). That is, asking the Lord of the harvest for more workers in the field.
- b) *Pockets of People* (Lk. 10:1). Jesus sent His disciples out in pairs to various cities and villages looking for communities receptive to the message of peace.
- c) *The Power of Presence* (Mt. 10:7-8; Lk. 10:10-12). The disciples went in the authority of Christ to heal, deliver, etc.
- d) *The Person of Peace* (Lk. 10:6-7). Find the ‘person of peace’ and stay in their *oikos*.
- e) *People of Purpose* (Mt. 10:11-13). Those gathered around the ‘person of peace’ become the church in their own rich soil (2005, pp.184-185).

4.2.

Practical application of Cole's organic church model.

In the last section of his book, Cole (2005, pp.26ff) relates how they have acted on this principle, planting 'organic churches' on campuses, in coffee shops, homes, businesses, etc. The organisational oversight is undertaken by *Church Multiplication Associates*, whose mandate is (2005, pp.26ff) "to reproduce healthy disciples, leaders, churches, and movements to fill the earth with God's kingdom" (2005, pp.26ff). They see the strengths of organic church as best prepared to saturate a region because it is informal, relational, and mobile. It is not financially encumbered, is easily planted in various settings, reproduces faster and spreads further.

Cole (2005, p.23) is somewhat critical of the 'simple church'/house church 'label' – his arguments include:

- The 'house church' in the USA has a reputation in some circles [according to Cole] for 'being composed of angry, nonconformist people who isolate themselves from everyone... (2005, p.23). He admits that this is not true of the vast majority.
- Christ's church is not contained by any building, whether it has a steeple or a chimney [the house church movement would agree wholeheartedly].
- "We do not mandate that churches remain small and meet in homes... we seek that churches be healthy and reproduce" (2005, p.23) [the house church movement would not see this as an absolute mandate either – in any case, the former part of the quote is not in opposition to the second part of the quote, witness for example the explosion of the house church in China].

Nothing in Cole's arguments militates against the house church movement globally – the writer believes his problem is more with the label and stereotypes of house church in the USA, from which perspective he largely speaks.

4.3.

How do others see 'organic church' as espoused by Cole?

Edwards (n.d., pp.119ff) has a **house church definition of 'organic church'** – he sees it in terms of *house churches* that have 'organic life' via "a way of meeting, a way of expressing the body of Christ, that is natural to your soil, to your culture, to your people: an indigenous church" (n.d., p.119).

He points out that assisting local believers in discovering this organic expression of church will take time. It will mean leaving these small groups of believers on their own at times, under the lordship of Christ, while the church planter is at hand to mentor, exhort, guide, etc where necessary.

Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.76-77), while they see much that is laudable in Cole's writings and practice, plus the fact that one has to admire his progressive thinking and evangelistic heart, make the point that **the church is somewhat more than that defined by Cole**. They don't see the church (putting it crudely) as just

"any old bunch of Christians who have bumped into each other. Neither do we think that a group of Christians who gather for a specific missional purpose is necessarily a church. Although it could be said that student bodies in theological seminaries, kids at Christian youth summer camps, and people on short-term mission trips create *temporary forms of church* [my emphasis], we believe it is the very impermanence of those communities that precludes us from identifying them with churches" (2003, pp.76-77).

They use the term 'church' in the same way as the NT, as e.g. Paul speaks of God's *ekklesia* to refer to an actual gathering of people which is divinely inspired and appointed, not to some ethereal theological concept. This gathering meets not merely according to Matthew 16 as described by Cole, but 'as God's redeemed people gathered' according to at least "*the neat snapshot' given us in Acts 2:42-47*" [my emphasis]. This involves a triangular balance of Christ, one another and the world – or, if you like *Communion* (in relationship with Christ), *Community* (in relationship with one

another) and *Commission* (in relationship with the world). In summary (2003, pp.77-79), the early church was concerned with balancing equal commitments to fostering their relationships with God, one another, and the world. The essence of church is *relationship*, and these three types of relationships interact so much that it is impossible to differentiate one from the other.

5.

AN EVALUATION OF AND COMPARISON WITH OTHER SIGNIFICANT, CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO CHURCH: *CHURCHES WITH SMALL GROUPS...* [note this is different to the cell church model, where small groups drive the church]

Usually churches venture into this arena in order to provide greater *relational intimacy* for their members. These small groups are called home cells, care-groups, 'relational kingdom groups,' etc.

There is so much to be said under this heading, that we will **limit ourselves to two very contemporary contributors on this subject, viz. Boren and Frazee.**

5.1.

Boren's (2007, pp.24ff) 'ten myths' about small groups and 'ten relational truths' maximising small groups in churches.

For example, the *first myth* is 'doing the right thing (a small group program) without consideration of the right way (the relational way) will produce community' – the *relational truth* here is that 'God's relational kingdom is a product of leaders who establish a way of living that stands in contrast to the culture.' Boren (2007, pp.33ff) then adds some *practical applications* of the above: e.g. 'establishing the way of love, reflecting God, being the right person, battling an anti-relational system,' etc.

The other nine relational truths named by Boren (2007, pp.45ff) are:

- Gathering around the Presence (of God)
- Seeking God's relational way (addressing how people live life)
- Writing a new story of mission

- Creating contagious relationships
- Embracing the relational dance ('relational kingdom groups are the result of the dynamic of the Spirit')
- Connecting relationships on four levels (public, social, personal, intimate space)
- Investing relationally in group leaders
- Equipping the people for kingdom relationships
- Mobilising for war

5.2.

Frazer writes about 'beyond small groups to authentic community.'

Frazer, as Boren, **seeks to move 'beyond small groups [per se] to authentic community.** He (2001, p.183) is concerned with the failure of the church in community, mainly as a result of the influence of *consumerism* :

“Everyone gets divided up into some kind of a market segment – so much so that that family nucleus is not a simple community but a detached collection of individuals. The church in the last fifty years, as a whole, has played right into this method. By and large, successful churches are not really building community, but they are doing a great job of marketing consumable services to individuals.”

Let us remember that Frazer's personal context is that of the N. American mega-church. He (2001, p.19) relates the story of a Texan church in decline which he took over in 1990, which, since then, has grown by 500%. They attained this result through 'radical re-visioning, a new paradigm for ministry, massive re-engineering,' etc. He (2001, p.20) indicates the main secret as being 'small groups that create community.' He and his team identified *15 characteristics of community life* – from the life of Jesus, kibbutz life and even a military base, leading to what Frazer (2002, p.22) calls the most 'profound truth' of his book viz. that *Biblical community is the life of Christ today.*” When the church is fully functioning, it exudes the presence, power, and purpose of Jesus Christ.” Frazer (2001, pp.41ff) deals excellently [in the writer's opinion] with the *factors working against community today*, especially the problem of *individualism* ('what about my

needs?').¹⁵⁴ He (2001, pp.43-44) deals with the influence of humanism, 'atomisation' (i.e. people drifting away from one another), the breakdown of common beliefs and purposes post-World War II (he points to the isolation of modern suburbia), people's innate longing for community, etc. He (2001:41) warns against small groups (*per se*) providing "occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others," and calls for a re-commitment to the basic tenets of the Christian faith.

Frazer (2001, pp.119ff) has an interesting section on '**five characteristics of community around a common place**' [all inherent to the house church – personal comment]:

- spontaneity (e.g. spontaneous conversations and friendships of pre-suburban life, e.g. at the corner store, etc)
- availability (giving care)
- frequency (Acts 2:42ff)
- common meals (Acts 2:42ff)
- geography (people living in close proximity) [see writer's argument for house church in this regard]: Frazer cites (in 2001, p.133) Nouwen's experience to the effect that 'community does not necessarily require profound intelligence, but it does require being *geographically close enough* to be available for each other spontaneously and frequently enough to feel safe and loved.'

Frazer (2001, p.164) goes on to supply a *diagrammatic 'Geographic Infrastructure'* for implementing the 'Connecting Church Infrastructure,' in order to build more intimacy in his mega-church structure.

¹⁵⁴ Frazer (2002, p.164) is worth quoting here, "Under consumerism, the Golden Rule says, 'Do to others before they do one to you' – or even more instructive, 'He who has the gold rules.' The notion is simple: the more cash you have, the better positioned you are to protect your rights. Logically then, under a community philosophy, *Christ* is at the center of our lives as the driving motivation and resource for the biblical definition of the Golden Rule. Under the consumerism philosophy, *money* is at the center of our lives as the driving motivation and resource for the latter definition of the Golden Rule. Jesus said that these two philosophies cannot coexist; one will win out against the other. The power of culture is tipped so strong toward individualism that it makes it very difficult for the Christian to sustain an allegiance to Christ. We claim Christ as Lord, but our actions of loving God and our neighbour are usually subservient to our own needs and wants. Many even find themselves looking to God to serve and sanctify their consumerism."

This involves three levels:

- a zone pastor, for oversight...
- approximately five to seven middle-sized geographic community groups meeting on Sunday mornings, led by *community group shepherds*... (typically the senior pastor would maintain four community groups himself, while the hired zone pastor would take three) (children and youth ministries essentially follow the same format as the adult ministries)
- home groups of approx. ten people, living in a neighbourhood, under the oversight of the community groups (above)

The writer struggles with the above - at least **four immediate difficulties come to mind** [all overcome by the house church approach]:

- the model applies almost exclusively to mega-churches
- such mega-churches would generally only be viable in affluent societies such as N. America (paid, professional staff, etc)
- the model demands somewhat complicated oversight, including time-demanding structures for 'lay' personnel
- the structure tends to be hierarchical in nature, which brings its own problems and militates against the innate simplicity and efficiency of biblical/NT structures, essentially horizontal NT leadership structures, etc

5.3.

We conclude this section on ‘church with small groups’ with an interesting insight of Lundy (2005, pp.94-96) with regard to the well-known Mars Hill Community Church in Michigan, USA, which uses what they call ‘missional house churches’

(Lundy visited with one such group):

- The group visited was made up of recently and radically converted people, coming out of traditional denominations, broken marriages, and those disillusioned with institutional Protestant churches.
- Initially Mars Hill’s small group ministry was modelled after Willow Creek’s, but in latter years the leadership realised that they wanted more of a *house church* [my emphasis] type of small group instead of just having a Bible study and some occasional times of deep sharing. An *Acts-like* model engendered grassroots caring, leading of new followers of Jesus through discipling to baptism, and things like baby dedications. These small groups functioned somewhat as churches within a larger church. Devolving to the micro-unit enabled more of their attendees to take on ministry responsibilities, to discover and develop their spiritual gifts, etc. The church’s goal is to have their house churches provide the support for their international and local partners at a real personal level (2005, p.95). The leaders (2005, pp.95-96) see this model as providing support for new believers; need-meeting interpersonal relationships; spawning of lay leaders; abiding in Christ in community; accessible opportunities for evangelism and ministry.

One must congratulate Mars Hill on their vision and courage. The writer would however proffer that the house church-with-network approach, utilising the relational ministry of trusted ‘five-fold ministers’ according to Ephesians 4:11ff, could do the same job with less structure, expense, etc. and with more spontaneity, creativity and mobility.

6.

AN EVALUATION OF AND COMPARISON WITH OTHER SIGNIFICANT, CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO CHURCH: ‘THE SECOND APOSTOLIC REFORMATION’...

The writer has been at pains to point out that no small group/house church movement can operate in isolation – it must be part of God’s global church globally and reflect its **apostolic nature**.^{155 156}

6.1.

The ‘apostolic element’ in the church is nothing new.

God’s church as an ‘apostolic movement’ is **as ancient as the NT itself** – see especially the Book of Acts. It runs as a thread through church history.

So, for example, Simson (1998, p.66) mentions ‘**the apostolic movement of Schwenckfeld**’ (1480-1561). Initially Luther had welcomed Caspar Schwenckfeld, ‘a preaching non-theologian,’ as ‘a messenger of God’ who had greatly impressed and influenced him. Schwenckfeld, however, had a dramatic ‘born-again’ experience in 1527, and through his subsequent studies of Scripture started to criticize Luther. He pleaded with Luther not to follow through with his sudden new direction after 1530, i.e. his almost Roman Catholic ecclesiology and his teaching that the new birth could happen through baptism (1998, p.60). French Bible teacher, Kuen (cited in Simson, 1998, p.60), writes “Luther started to persecute Schwenckfeld with bitter hatred, called him a demonized fool and a heretic, and refused even to read his writings, sending them back unread... The Reformer of Schlesien had to wander around Europe like a hunted deer.”

The outlawed Schwenckfeld in **NT apostolic fashion** went around and established lively fellowships in many places, essentially home groups catering for Bible study and prayer. To avoid further tensions with the established church, Schwenckfeld did not

¹⁵⁵ According to Anderson’s (2006, p.182) simple/basic definition, “An apostle is one who is sent out with a specific commission and task, with the responsibility of reporting back when the task is completed” (Acts 14:26-28; Eph. 4:11).

¹⁵⁶ The continuation of ‘apostleship’ as understood by Simson, Wagner and others is somewhat controversial, although increasingly not simply dismissed out of hand as it used to be.

introduce baptism and the Lord's Supper into these groups. When he died in Ulm in 1561, Lutheran pastors tried to bring his many disciples back into their churches by force, and, if they were not willing, had them thrown into jail and their children taken away from them.

6.2.

The 'second apostolic movement' of today. ¹⁵⁷

6.2.1.

From bureaucratic hierarchies to apostolic networks.

Gibbs and Coffee (2001, pp.76ff) give us an interesting introduction to what they call 'The emergence of *new apostolic networks*' [my italics]. They (2001, pp.76-77) mention **Wagner** as having "the insight to identify a new emerging-church paradigm and the foresight to appreciate the potential significance of 'new apostolic networks.'" Wagner has been trying to bring such networks together in the USA, despite their diversity theologically and ecclesiastically. In his research he has identified **two major characteristics of churches making up the 'apostolic profile'**:

- a) They are increasingly adopting the 'new name' Wagner has given the movement.
- b) They have a 'new authority structure': they are moving from bureaucratic authority to personal authority, legal structure to relational structure, control to coordination, rational leadership to charismatic leadership.

6.2.2.

Gibbs and Coffee (2001, pp.77-78) mention **another leader in this area, viz.**

Cannistraci, who describes apostolic ministry being restored as follows:

- restoring the NT office of the apostle [the writer has a problem with this – see later]
- imparting Christ's apostolic anointing to equip, mature and activate the people of God

¹⁵⁷ Grudem (1994, pp.906ff) argues for the uniqueness of NT apostles, not seeing any role whatsoever for this office today.

- a revival of supernatural signs, wonders and miracles of the kinds that followed the first-century apostles
- a worldwide deployment of thousands of apostles; their development will transcend groups, denominational hierarchies and agencies, and will not be the work of any one organization

6.2.3.

Wagner (2004, pp.23-180) lists nine changes he believes are in process in the shift from the current paradigm to the new apostolic paradigm:

- From denominational government to apostolic government* (2004, pp.23ff).
Denominations have been with us for 300 years, affecting us all. They started out as apostolic movements, but surrendered (certainly in N. America) to the culture of democratic politics and government. This can be seen in churches headed by pastors (contrast Eph. 4:11ff and 1 Cor. 12:28), often employed and fired at will, often ruled by the administrators of the church, etc.¹⁵⁸ What is needed is a new wineskin, viz. that of *relationships*, as seen for example in apostolic networks across denominational borders for the sake of the gospel [the writer can give a number of South African examples where the latter is working with much encouragement, including the house church network of which he is part].
- From internal reform to apostolic renewal* (2004, pp.39ff). Most denominations have been in decline since 1965. The hope of denominational renewal from the inside has been dashed again and again. Current attempts by 'evangelical renewal movements' face much opposition – Wagner (2004, pp.49-50) gives denominational examples of this in N. America. If separation is the only way out of this impasse, this separation must always be for the sake of *life*, nothing else (2004, pp.52ff).

¹⁵⁸ If this sounds like an exaggeration, the writer has witnessed the same on many occasions as a pastor of a 'mainline denomination' over four decades – many of his colleagues have suffered this fate.

- c) *From a church vision to a kingdom vision* (2004, pp.57ff). The focus is no longer merely on the 'local church,' but on the wider church's transformation of society as a whole. Thus we need a transformation of thinking (2004, pp.2ff):
- Understand the role of Christ's lordship and kingdom in a new way
 - Pursue 'the church in the work-place,' i.e. in every sphere of life
 - Christian ministry is not confined to the local/nuclear church
 - The church has a God-designed government which is headed up by apostles and prophets in the local and extended church [the writer's house church network is overseen by proven leaders in the city, gifted with one or more of the 5-fold gifts of Eph. 4:11ff – all purely on a relational basis].
 - While at the moment local and extended churches seem to be operating from 'two separate cultural rule-books,' Wagner feels that their leaders will resolve their present conflicts.
- d) *From a heritage-based church alignment to a territorial church alignment* (2004, pp.73ff). Denominational leaders have traditionally struggled to cross-pollinate. More and more 'city church' gatherings are taking place across the globe, despite opposition (2004, pp.79ff). Wagner (2004, pp.80ff) gives a case-study of this in Guildford, England.
- e) *From the expansion of the church to the transformation of society* (2004, pp.87ff). Wagner equates the 'second apostolic age' with the sovereign action of God for the expansion of His kingdom on earth. This means social transformation of cities and even nations – he (2004, pp.96ff) cites examples in countries like Uganda, Fiji, Guatemala, etc.
- f) *From a tolerance of the kingdom of satan to an invasion of the kingdom of satan* (2004, pp.103ff). Wagner (2004, pp.106ff) talks of the rediscovery of 'spiritual warfare' in the work of the kingdom, resisted in many places – he recalls accusations of 'heresy' when he first began to teach this at his own Fuller Theological Seminary in the USA some years ago. He (2004, p.107) feels this prejudice was corrected at Lausanne 2.

- g) *From theological education to equipping ministers* (2004, pp.119ff). Schwartz and Schalk of the German-based *Natural Church Development* (cited in Wagner, 2004, p.121), in their world-wide research of the church across the spectrum, maintains that formal theological training (*per se*) has had a negative effect on church growth.¹⁵⁹ Wagner (2004, pp.122ff) says Barna concurs with this conclusion and sees this as the reason for many churches instituting their own theoretical and on-the-job training of leadership. Christian ministry is not merely for clergy but all church members. The need is not only for education but for character-building. Wagner (2004, pp.135ff) points to 'new forms of church,' *including the house church movement* [my emphasis] that are practising the above: on-the-job, including the market-place during the week. For new forms of church one needs new forms of training (2004, pp.135ff).
- h) *From a heavy doctrinal load to a lighter doctrinal load* (2004, pp.141ff). We need to be concerned about the 'absolutes' rather than the 'peripherals,' the latter being influenced by interpretations, deductions and subjective opinions/personal preferences/feelings/cultural norms. Amongst the 'absolutes' Wagner (2004, pp.147ff) includes such doctrines as the authority of Scripture, justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers.
- i) *From Reformed sanctification to Wesleyan holiness* (2004, pp.163ff).¹⁶⁰ Wagner (2004, pp.171ff) pays tribute to the contribution of Luther and Calvin and others like them but feels that their views often undermined the ability of believers to attain to personal holiness (possible in this world) which was in any case expected by God – Wagner shares how he gradually was convinced of Wesley's position on the subject, with his strong emphasis on personal obedience and personal holiness. Wagner (2004, pp.178ff) sees the great need for modern 'apostles' to display personal holiness of life, in fact he says

¹⁵⁹ See their *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development*, which is based on the most comprehensive research project ever conducted on the causes of church growth. More than 1000 churches in 32 countries on all 5 continents took part in this study, with a total of 4.2 million responses being analysed.

¹⁶⁰ This point is mentioned simply in fairness to Wagner and in order to give his 'complete' view. The writer does not see this as a major point for the house church movement, where different understandings of sanctification are accommodated, I am sure. *Perhaps* Wagner is challenging the somewhat lax personal morality of many church leaders and members today.

most of those who are true 'apostles' are godly people. [the writer does experience within house churches, in general, a desire for growth in personal godliness – perhaps because of the smallness of groups and often stronger accountability-relationships, whether Calvinistic or Methodist].

The writer shares the reservations of Stott (cited in Gibbs & Coffee, 2001, p.78) as to the contemporary emphasis on the 'office' of 'apostle': in answer to this we may refer e.g. to the various uses of the NT term 'apostle,' the uniqueness of the NT apostles as eye-witnesses of the historic Jesus and His resurrection, etc. Gibbs and Coffee (2001, pp.78,83) also express the view that apostolic leadership, as experienced in the first century of the church, cannot be replicated in the vastly different scenario of the twenty first century... however, the *function* [my italics] is no less vital today, and will express itself in varying ways and be modified according to changing circumstances. ¹⁶¹

6.2.4.

'Missional mode church' demands apostolic leadership.

Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.165ff) write that if one moves from *christendom mode church* to *missional mode church*, there is immediately a demand for 'apostolic leadership' in the NT sense. The authors use an acronym APEPT, derived from God's gifts to His church in Ephesians 4:1-16 [note, a letter originally written to a network of house churches in the region of Ephesus]: A = apostle, P = prophet, E = evangelist, P = pastor, T = teacher. They (2003:168), as above, insist that when we talk about 'apostolic leadership' we must understand not so much the institution or office but its *function*, which is miles from the modern hierarchical 'senior pastor' model so popular today. APEPT (2003, pp.175ff) is 'organic,' i.e. part of the *DNA* of church and is not to be

¹⁶¹ The writer also differs with Wagner as to his view on the necessity for 'strong single pastors as leaders' if the church is to grow – see Grudem's criticism (1994, p.929) of Wagner's *Leading Your Church to Growth* which dogmatically claims "The principle argument of this book is that if churches are going to maximise their growth potential they need pastors who are strong leaders... Make no mistake about it: it is a rule." Grudem points out that the book is filled with anecdotes and pronouncements from church growth experts telling the reader that leadership by a strong single pastor is essential to significant church growth – in Grudem's estimation and in the writer's, this is just not true, on the basis of Scripture, church history and contemporary church experience.

tampered with. It is reproducible, self-sustaining and self-energizing and allows for both unity and diversity. Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.178-179) are convinced that much of the current malaise in the church is directly due to a neglect of the missional/apostolic element of the NT.^{162 163}

7.

‘THE HOUSE CHURCH APPROACH’ – THE MOST RELEVANT WAY OF BEING CHURCH IN TODAY’S WORLD.

7.1.

Advantages of the house church today.

The writer has sought to give as honest as possible a presentation of the major approaches to church in our post-modern world, plus an evaluation in the light of Scripture and comparison with the contemporary house church movement. He has expressed how the other movements, e.g. cell church, emerging church, etc. all have contributions to make which the traditional church and house church movement cannot afford to ignore, indeed it must learn from these. However he would argue that **in virtually every instance, today’s house church movement has major advantages over the researched alternatives outlined** – many of which he has already referred to.

7.2.

Practical illustration of the relevance of the house church to our time.

Southern Baptist Garrison and his colleagues (1999, pp.33-36), at the end of the 20th century, did a significant survey of ten significant Church Planting Movements and found at least ten elements present in every one of them, e.g. prayer, abundant sowing of the Good News, etc. One of these ten *indispensable elements* they identified was believers grouping as cells or **house churches**.

¹⁶² See their *The Shaping of Things to Come* (2003, pp.178-179) for an explanation of the last phrase.

¹⁶³ On the whole matter of the ‘apostolic’ and the ‘prophetic’ today, see Simson’s PDF on this subject, *The Starfish Manifesto*. It contains much excellent material in the writer’s estimation, but space and the scope of my dissertation does not allow further input at this point.

“Church buildings do appear in Church Planting Movements. However, the vast majority of the churches continue to be small, reproducible cell (or house) churches of ten to thirty members meeting in homes or storefronts.¹⁶⁴ There is a distinction between cell churches and house churches. Cell churches are linked to one another in some type of structured network. Often this network is linked to a larger, single church identity... House churches may look the same as cell churches, but they generally are not organized under a single authority or hierarchy of authorities.¹⁶⁵ As autonomous units, **house churches** may lack the unifying structure of cell churches, but they are *typically more dynamic* [my emphasis]. Each has its advantages. Cell groups are easier to shape and guide toward doctrinal conformity, while house churches are less vulnerable to suppression by a hostile government. Both types of churches are common in Church Planting Movements, often appearing in the same movement” (1999, p.35).

7.3.

Church reformation today.

Simson (1998, pp.xvff), a Lutheran, has posited (Reformation-style!) **Fifteen Theses Toward Church Reformation Today:**

1. *Christianity is a way of life, not a series of religious meetings.* “The nature of church is not reflected in a constant series of religious meetings led by professional clergy in holy places specially reserved to experience Jesus... but rather by the prophetic way followers of Christ live their everyday life in spiritual extended families, as a vivid answer to the questions that society asks, and in the place where it counts the most – in their homes” (1998, p.xv).
2. *Time to change the ‘cathegogue system’:* i.e. ‘Constantinian Christendom’ based largely on the two elements of “a Christian version of the OT temple – the

¹⁶⁴ The writer recalls a mission trip to Angola in the 1990’s and sharing in such very house meetings and store-front meetings (in Lubango) which throbbled with spiritual life, somewhat in contrast to the ‘mainline’ churches visited and Services attended.

¹⁶⁵ This has always been held as a Baptist principle re church government. Whether it is *truly practised* in reality, in the experience of the writer, is debatable. It seems each denomination/church group has a hierarchy of sorts, or very easily sets one up ...

cathedral – and a worship pattern styled after the Jewish synagogue,” neither taught nor endorsed by the NT (1998, p.xv).

3. *The third Reformation*: the first referring to a reformation of theology under Luther and the reformers, the second to the 18th century reformation of pietism, the third to a ‘reformation of church structure’ (1998, p.xvi).
4. *From ‘church houses to house churches’*: from the time of the NT there has been no such thing as ‘a house of God’ (Acts 7:48:50 – for this principle Stephen laid down his life). The church is the people of God. The church is at home where people are at home (1998, pp.xvi-xvii).
5. *The church has to become small in order to grow large*: most churches today are too big to experience fellowship in the NT sense (1998:xvii).
6. *No church is led by a pastor alone*: rather by elders and gifted leaders according to Ephesians 2:20 and 4:11-12 (1998, p.xviii).
7. *The right pieces, but fitted together in the wrong way*: That is, churches have either avoided the ‘fivefold ministry’ of Ephesians 4:11 by being rigidly institutionalised on the one hand, or on the other hand, have become so ‘spontaneous’ that its ministers are not accountable to the body of Christ (1998, p.xviii).
8. *Out of the hands of bureaucratic clergy and on towards the priesthood of all believers*: 1 Timothy 2:5. Present bureaucratic systems have to change in order to truly empower the priesthood of all believers (1998, p.xix).
9. *Return from organized to organic forms of Christianity*: the ‘body of Christ’ is a vivid description of an organic being rather than an organised mechanism. What has become a maximum of organisation with a minimum of organism has to change into a minimum of organisation to allow a maximum of organism (1998, p.xx).¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ While this may seem hopeless idealism to many, the writer has seen this principle at work over the past three years with remarkable success in the PE Small Group Network and beyond. The writer has experienced ‘both sides of the camp’ (traditional church and house church) in his pastoral ministry.

10. *From worshipping our worship to worshipping God*: Simson is referring to the common 'up-front' performance-oriented Sunday 'worship services' so popular today, but leaving many worshippers frustrated and largely un-transformed in character and lifestyle. *Worship is a way of life* (1998, p.xxi).
11. *Stop bringing people to church, and start bringing the church to the people*: the mission of the church will never be accomplished by just adding to the existing structure – it will take nothing less than a mushrooming of the church through spontaneous multiplication into areas of the world as yet untouched (1998, pp.xxi-xxii).
12. *Rediscovering the Lord's Supper as a real supper with real food*: the Lord's Supper in the NT was more a substantial supper with a symbolic meaning rather than a symbolic supper with a substantial meaning (1998, p.xxii).
13. *From denominations to city-wide celebrations*: authenticity in the neighbourhoods connected with a regional or city-wide corporate identity will make the church more politically significant and spiritually convincing (1998, p.xxiii).
14. *Developing a persecution-proof spirit*: in a world that has largely lost its absolutes, coupled with growing ideologization, privatization and spiritualization of politics and economics, Christians will come under increasing pressure. Hence the need for a persecution-proof spirit as well as persecution-proof *structures* [my emphasis] (1998, p.xxiv).
15. *The church comes home*: much of Christianity has fled the family, often as a place of its own spiritual defeat. As God is in the business of recapturing homes, the church turns back to its roots (1998, p.xxiv).

In *summary*, Simson says that changes cannot merely be cosmetic – God is not going to join our church, so perhaps we should reconcile to joining His, hence the urgent need to together rediscover what His church should look like (2006, p.40).

7.3.1.

Let no one under-estimate the cost of church reformation today.

Gordon Cosby (cited in R & J Banks, 1998, p.85), well-known pastor of the Church of the Savior in Washington DC, has said about *the kind of commitment it will take* for the church to fulfil her calling in the world,

“It says to a specific group of people that I am willing to be with you. I am willing to belong to you, I am willing to be the people of God with you. This is never a tentative commitment that I can withdraw from. It is a commitment to a group of miserable, faltering sinners who make with me a covenant to live in depth until we see in each other the mystery of Christ himself and until in these relationships we come to know ourselves as belonging to the body of Christ.”

Establishing real community today will have to engage our natural activism, all our busyness, the mobility of our society, etc – however there is no other way to be the church (R & J Banks, 1998, pp.86ff).¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ As a matter of interest, R and J Banks (1998, pp.110-112) have recorded some basic ‘church covenant’ examples (in both cases Mennonite churches in the USA) which try to build on this commitment to God, the church and the world. The writer has made use of these in his house church oversight with positive response.

**CHAPTER V: HOUSE CHURCHES, THE MOST EFFECTIVE STRUCTURE TO
FULFIL CHRIST'S MANDATE IN THE WORLD**

1. STRUCTURE - 'KEY' IN THE RE-INCARNATION OF THE CHURCH
2. COMMUNITY FLOWS FROM STRUCTURE
3. A RADICAL APPROACH TO CHURCH RESTRUCTURING
4. THE HOUSE CHURCH AND MISSIONALITY
5. HOUSE CHURCH AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION
6. HOUSE CHURCH AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
7. HOUSE CHURCH AND FAMILY TRANSFORMATION
8. HOUSE CHURCH AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE
9. COMMON *OBJECTIONS* TO THE HOUSE CHURCH STRUCTURE
10. LEARNING FROM INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES - PAST/PRESENT

1.

STRUCTURE - A KEY *PRACTICAL* FACTOR IN THE RE-INCARNATION OF THE CHURCH

1.1.

The great historical renewal groups and church structure.

As already pointed out at length, the house church structure and spiritual vibrancy of the early church was suppressed by Constantine's return to an OT-type 'temple-model' which was particularly vicious in separating clergy [now professionalised] and laity. As Hadaway and Wright and DuBose (1987, p.72) have pointed out, it has always been in the *great renewal groups* (Waldensians, Anabaptists, etc) that an effort to recover both the nature and function of the church in terms of *structure* has occurred.

1.2.

A veteran cross-cultural church-planter on the inadequacy of traditional church structures, and the place of the house church in church-planting.

Edwards (n.d., pp.11ff) in his trademark, blunt way has written that *throughout all of Christendom there are only four ways to meet*:

- a. The *Protestant way*. He (n.d., p.11) claims that the average N. American Christian has *never experienced an organic expression of the church*:
“when you walk into a church service on a Sunday morning, pews, pulpit, etc., you are participating in a ritual the British brought to N. America back in the early 1600’s.”
This approach is basically the same all over the world – in Edwards’ (n.d., pp. 11-12) words, ‘more entrenched than the Bible... maybe more entrenched in our lives than God’ [one reason why most people today experience ‘church’ as boring and never or seldom return after a rare visit].
- b. The *Roman Catholic way*. This has essentially remained the same since Gregory the Great’s liturgy was introduced 1500 years ago (n.d., p.16).
- c. The *Eastern Orthodox way*. The Eastern Orthodox church claims its liturgy from second and third century Christians (n.d., pp.16-17).
- d. The *‘Brethren’ way*. In Edwards’ (n.d., pp.17-18) opinion, although insisting on its Scriptural basis, it was introduced in about 1840 and has remained rigidly unchanged in every land, nation, tongue and culture.

Edwards then goes on to call for ‘a new beginning’ (n.d., pp.28ff) – beginning with the basic premise of the *ecclesia*, that Christians all over the world move toward *Jesus Christ being the centre of the ‘ecclesia.’*¹⁶⁸ This includes a move toward the organic, i.e. a culture-contextualised way of meeting developed by the ‘laity’ under the guidance of the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. He (n.d., p.29) remarks, “In every nation we need that

¹⁶⁸ How many churches could honestly claim themselves to be truly Christ-centred, in polity and practice? Attending recently a day-seminar presented by Africa Inland Mission, *Taste Africa*, the writer was intrigued and encouraged by their ‘motto’ appearing on all their publications: “*Christ-Centred Churches Among All African Peoples*” (e.g. their newsletter for April 2009, ‘Africa Connection,’ p.1).

new way to meet. It is a way that is *instinctive and natural* to believers within each specific culture.” It is a way to be *discovered*.

Edwards (n.d., p.112) believes that the most usual result of the above is for people to meet in homes, and while meeting in homes does not solve all problems, it is a large step *toward* a beginning.

1.3.

Flexible simple/house churches and their networks, from a *practical* point of view.

We **conclude** that a return to flexible house churches and networks may not be a bad place to start, nor a bad way to continue the journey!

D. Jones (1989, pp.31-32), veteran cross-cultural missionary, gives an *historical example*, ‘The Ascension Experience.’ The Molino Baptist Church in Ascension (Paraguay) began in the home of Victor Isasi in January, 1986. By all standards this began as a house church. Other discipleship and fellowship meetings were held in neighbourhood homes. Leadership of the meetings was rotated between Victor, Donald himself, and another member, Hugo. *“It is significant that as long as the meetings were held in Victor’s home, he and his wife took a great deal of interest in the work and its members.”*

After ten months of meetings and an average attendance of 15-20, the group decided they needed ‘a real church’ building. They purchased a small house and began construction of an auditorium to seat 65 people. A seminary student was called to lead the church. Victor, who had been the unofficial ‘pastor’ in his home and also the main economic supporter, soon lessened his interest and participation. *The work plateaued at a membership of 12 adult members and several children. Because of economic difficulties and poor planning, the auditorium has not been completed.* Jones maintains that unfortunately all of the creative energies of the leaders had focussed on ‘the building.’ When the work began, home meetings were held in four homes and could have continued in these and other homes. The three leaders were all available and capable of leading house groups. Jones (1989, p.32) asks, *“If the group had focused on the proliferation of house groups instead of the purchase of a building, would growth have been different?”* [my italics]. Jones (1989, p.32) concludes,

“No one can answer that question. However, a renewed focus on house groups might be the key to renew the work. Thomas Law III, a field missionary working in the greater Ascension area, has told me on several occasions that at least 400 Baptist churches are needed in the area. *For the biblical and practical reasons mentioned in this study, it is apparent that the proliferation of house groups and house churches in urban Ascension could be an effective method of planting those churches*” [my emphasis].

2.

COMMUNITY FLOWS FROM STRUCTURE, CONTRARY TO WHAT WE MAY EXPECT.

2.1.

An anthropological and *practical* perspective on community and structure.

Dean Arnold (cited in Birkey, 1998, p.13), a professor of Anthropology, endorses Birkey’s argument that, although many are calling for an incarnational approach to church ministry, **many church structures do not reflect the Incarnational and relational, non-verbal message of the gospel.** Recovering the latter involves incorporating the theological integrity of the incarnation into the structure of the church. Thus the church, primarily, should be *relational: personal, intimate, committed, and small – like a family.* Arnold (cited in Birkey, 1988, p.13) asks, what better way to communicate the personal nature of God and his love and commitment to people than by having a church in a home? Arnold adds that he personally experienced these truths in the context of a house church over a number of years. He believes that the house church is culturally appropriate in every culture, remembering that the household is “a universal phenomenon found in every culture.”

2.2.

Community and structure in the Chinese house church movement.

Arnold’s argument [above] is supported historically by Lambert *in his record of the house church movement in China.* He (1994, pp.12ff) tells of how

“The total disappearance of the institutional church for the entire period 1966-1979 (with the exception of two churches reopened in Beijing in 1971 and 1972 for the diplomatic community) meant that Christianity went underground to survive. The only place where corporate religious life could still be conducted was in **the home** [my emphasis], and even this was dangerous. Yet **this forced de-institutionalisation was profoundly to alter the form of Protestant Christianity in China.** *Shorn of ritual and religiosity, this grassroots, home-based Christianity has provided the dynamic behind both the influx back into the officially reopened churches since 1979, and the development of the self-consciously independent house church movement*” [my emphasis].

Lambert (1994, pp.13ff) elaborates how meeting in the home for Bible study, worship and prayer was nothing new to many Chinese Christians, especially in rural areas, *even before 1949*. Such groups were formed as embryonic churches as the result of evangelistic outreach.¹⁶⁹

3.

RADICAL CHURCH RE-STRUCTURING.

3.1.

In his challenging *Revolution – Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary*, Barna (2006, p.61) writes on ‘A New Way of Doing Church.’ He compares the traditional local church model to Henry Ford’s ‘Model T’ – Ford professed, ‘People can have a Model T in any color they want – as long as it’s black.’ Barna speaks of **millions of**

¹⁶⁹ While some might say that the persecution of the Chinese Church forced the believers/leaders to be ‘self-sufficient’ – is that not a good thing, i.e. their growth to maturity even in the absence of ‘foreign’ missionaries? Was this not Paul’s methodology when he ‘abandoned’ church-plants after only a few weeks or months in order for them to discover NT ecclesiology for themselves? Is this not what is leading the Chinese church to becoming a missionary-sending nation of note in our time? (see ‘Back to Jerusalem Movement’)

‘revolutionaries’ pursuing other, more relevant alternatives outside of the ‘sanctuary walls.’

Sine (cited in Birkey, 1988, pp.76-78), a futurist, pointed out that the movement that conquered the Roman Empire was in reality *a movement of small house churches*, and how the Mennonite movement in the USA took note of this and drafted a reform document which concluded, “What is being called for in the reform document, so far as the congregation is concerned, *is not some minor modification, but a new structure* [my emphasis]: the structure of a defined and committed membership functioning together in the manner of a *primary group*” [my emphasis].¹⁷⁰

He (1988, p.153) concludes his point by saying, “evangelicals could profit by a stronger affirmation of Anabaptistic **radicalness** [my emphasis] in their attempts at reform and renewal. The Anabaptist reformation largely succeeded in its attempt to restore New Testament teaching and practice, partly because it was willing to be ‘radical.’”

Edwards (n.d., pp.25ff) states that we cannot merely adapt the traditional local church model [Edwards would include in restructuring the use of buildings, the traditional sermon, professional clergy, etc.]. A hybrid is not good enough – there has to be a new beginning, even it means a return to first principles (n.d., pp.24,33). He (n.d., p.27) challenges us as to whether we are ready for a break with the way of expression of church as known all over the world, then adds “This is asking people to give up their present identity! Make no mistake, the way Christians meet together is the center and soul of *who we are*. Take that away and we lose our identity. How we meet on Sunday is the *one* factor that identifies us... to ourselves and to the world... that, dear reader, is revolution.”^{171 172}

¹⁷⁰ Birkey (1988, p.88) draws attention to Jesus’ constant clash with centuries-old authority structures, including the Gentile hierarchical thinking of the time – see His teaching on servant-leadership in Matthew 20:25-29, etc. While the Gentile model worked from top to bottom, the kingdom model worked from bottom to top.

¹⁷¹ In the latter years of the writer’s ministry he often wondered what would happen if the congregation he pastored arrived at 9 am on a Sunday morning, only to find the doors closed and services interrupted, say,

[remember that for 95% of all Protestant Christians around the world, according to Edwards (n.d., p.100), the highest single act they engage in as Christians is the act of ‘going to church.’ Any kind of change is very threatening to the church at large].¹⁷³

Edwards (n.d., pp.123ff) is *constructive*, in that he commends, on the basis of his understanding of Scripture and personal experience, some practical steps toward correcting the situation, which include the following [we mention only two at this point]:

- a. *Start as a totally new people*, with a church planter in the midst (who is committed to leading this body of believers to the point where they are able to meet under the headship of Christ – that necessitates the church-planter’s leaving at some stage, and then monitoring and advising as help is required). One has to get the laity to function as body of Christ.
- b. *Discover together as a new people*, under the guidance of God (and get, where necessary, help from the church planter – i.e. only regarding the very basics, e.g. Acts 2:42), *how* you will meet in the context of your indigenous group. Don’t be afraid of failure – as long as there is deep commitment to Christ and to one another. Really build community, get to know each other, and see where things lead as you try ‘the road less travelled’... The essence of church gathering (according to Edwards) is to **gather indigenously, organically, simply and Christo-centrally** [my emphasis].

Frost & Hirsch (2003, pp.18ff) endorse the challenge regards church re-structuring, viz that it is not just a case of tinkering with the external features of the church. This is for the simple reason that its very *DNA* is flawed. “The overly reproduced Christendom-mode church has at its core a number of fundamental flaws. These flaws occur in the model’s very *DNA*. The way forward is not to tinker with its external features, but to

for a month, in order to ‘rediscover church’... He has to confess that his nerve failed me – in any case, he might have struggled to get it past the church leadership in the first place!

¹⁷² Since being in a relational network of house churches (and other more progressive church leaders), members of our house church have often shared, ‘My friend wants to know where our building is...’ They liked what they heard about the sense of community, etc., but enquired ‘what denomination are you?’ When our members responded about house churches, the reaction went something like this, “‘Hayi,’ you can’t have church in a house!” Our members usually respond, ‘Come and see!’

¹⁷³ Talking about ‘structure,’ just try and change the time of the Morning Service, and see the fall-out!

rebirth a new movement on different ground. Those flaws can be generally categorized into three broad areas”:

- Being Attractional (‘come to us’) rather than Missional (going to the world)
- Dualism (separation of sacred and profane)
- Hierarchy (the authors expound each of these issues thoroughly)

The authors (2003, pp.22ff) conclude constructively with some pointers in what they consider to be the right direction (they provide supporting case-studies from around the world:

- a. Focus on the journey of faith and the experience of God;
- b. Plan for less structure and more direct involvement by participants;
- c. Have a sense of flexibility in order and a distinctly non-hierarchical culture;
- d. Recognise that the experience of church is about the sustaining of discipleship.

3.2.

Re-structuring and the house church.

The writer would argue that the **adaptable house church** can more easily apply most, if not all, of the *principles* noted above – including those of simplicity, God’s people discovering the way to meet anew, no hierarchy (though there is built-in accountability), indigenoussness, contextualisation, etc.

4.

THE HOUSE CHURCH AND MISSIONALITY.

4.1.

The failures of denominationalism contrasted with the success of house churches in mission: a case-study from the Chinese church.

One of the major house church leaders, Brother Yun (2003, p.48), in his book *Back to Jerusalem*, included a photograph (below) illustrating the level of foreign

(denominational) control of the Chinese church in 1905 – it would take persecution to bring about an indigenous, non-denominational church which would much more effectively cope with the evangelisation of China, even against tremendous odds.

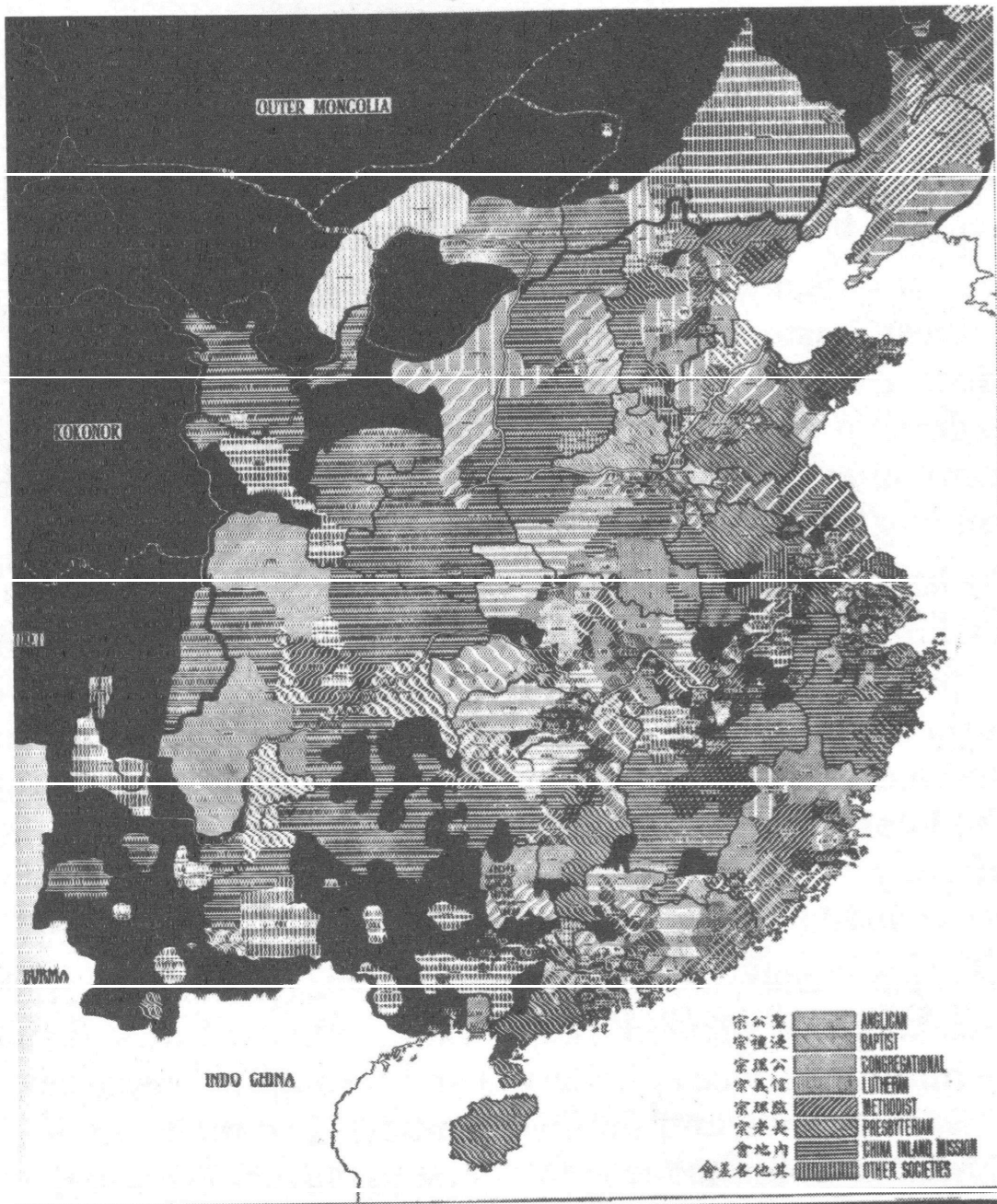


1. Delegates at the National Christian Conference held at Shanghai in 1907 to discuss the future of the church in China. The level of foreign control of the Chinese church at the time is clear: of the more than 800 delegates, only a handful were Chinese.

(note the words under the photograph, 'The level of foreign control of the Chinese church is clear: of the more than 800 delegates, only a handful were Chinese')

(pto)

Yun (2003, p.16) also includes a map, indicating the various Western denominations working in different parts of China in the early 1900's in the areas allocated to them. A caption below the map asked, 'Can China be made Christian this way?'



THE CHRISTIAN "PARTITIONMENT" OF CHINA. CAN CHINA BE MADE CHRISTIAN THIS WAY?

The ill-starred map from the CCC survey volume, The Christian Occupation of China, presented to the new NCC in 1922. The caption is FJR's.

Yun (2003, p.16) says, 'No!' "Through fifty years of persecution God pulled down denominational barriers,¹⁷⁴ creating a more unified church more interested in winning souls than building churches. *None of the Western denominations labelled on this map can be found among China's house churches today*" [my emphasis].

Yun (2003, p.64) also mentions the legacy of James Hudson Taylor, as far as the Back to Jerusalem movement is concerned (taking the Good News back to Jerusalem via the ancient trade routes by which the gospel came to China), viz. his refusal to construct organisational walls that slow down the advance of the gospel and cause division among believers. Taylor was able to cross denominational barriers and lead the body of Christ to work together under the banner of Christ, so that the church could fulfil God's vision.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ As one moves in house church circles, generally speaking, there is an absence of denominational prejudice and traditional church 'baggage' that makes for a more natural church life and evangelism focussed on the kingdom of Christ.

¹⁷⁵ The writer was deeply moved by a section from Yun's devotional book *Living Water*, especially a meditation on *True Unity* (2008, pp.142ff): "For most of the 1980's, the house churches in China were unified. We all served Jesus together and didn't care what kind of group we belonged to... Things started to change in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Many Western Christians had heard about the tremendous revival going on in China, and they wanted to be a part of it. They sent representatives to China to meet with house church leaders. They told us we weren't educated enough and that our greatest need was for more theological training. They assured us, 'Our denomination has the best training program. We will bless you with it.' For years believers had come to Hong Kong and carried Bibles across the border to us in China, and we were very grateful. Now, however, thousands of teaching books were also being carried across, promoting certain favorite doctrines of each denomination. Before this happened, things had been much simpler. Jesus was our teacher and our professor. We didn't ask each other what school we had attended. Rather, we asked, 'In which prison have you been receiving your higher education from the Lord?' When I was in prison in 1991, some close brothers came to visit me. With tears in their eyes, they reported what was going on in the church and said that Satan was reconstructing barriers the Lord has just spent thirty years dismantling..."

Yun goes on to relate how on his release he returned to preaching. His book *Back to Jerusalem* details the wonderful story of the re-unification of the house church movement in China, and how the three key house church leaders have re-committed to one another and have been unified in their desire to take the message of Christ back to the place of its origins. Yun (2008, p.143) concludes, "Tragically, there are still Western denominations and ministries today that are trying to erect barriers between China's Christians. They did not come to China to serve the body of Christ, but rather to impose their own beliefs and agendas on us. This is a tragic and bitter blow for the kingdom of God..."

Whatever our ecclesiology, my brothers and sisters in the Western Church (the writer includes himself), we need to *repent* for what we have done. The writer personally believes that the Chinese church (not without its flaw and mistakes) has far more to teach us than we them.

4.2.

The house church and missionality – building on NT principles.

Birkey (1991, pp.1-5) lists these as follows:

- a. *The 'household of God' image contributed to the theological and experiential understanding of the church's essence.* Note the fundamental NT emphasis on the church as 'the family of God' and 'the household of faith' (Rom. 8:15-16; Gal. 4:5-7, 6:10; Eph. 2:19, 3:14-15, 5:1, 6:23). As an experiential reality this had an overwhelming effect on the early believers' ability to understand and practise the doctrine of the church. Since household and family are *universal norms* [my emphasis] in cultures everywhere, new churches with this ethos become effective in mission.
- b. The house church *nurtured a healthy social integration of Christianity.* Social mixing would be found in any house church community. For example, racial diversity, social oneness and sexual equality are vividly portrayed in the decentralized house churches of Rome (Rom. 16).
- c. The house churches provided *a fertile seedbed for the most revolutionary equalization of racial class and sexual distinctions brought about by the Christ event.* Note Galatians 3:28, in Christ neither 'male nor female'... (women, alongside men, were full-membered participants in the house-church Christian communities; women, side by side with men, were partners in leadership and ministry; women, along with men, led in public prayer; women, alongside men, prophesied in church; women, with and in the presence of men, had authority in the church body; wives, as well as their husbands, were partners in mutual submission, arising out of their mutual love; etc). [how relevant to the 'new South Africa' and other cultures where women's rights are often denied or repressed. Unfortunately the church has in the past (and often still today) restricted the role of women to secondary positions in the body and in ministry, and this has hindered the fulfilment of the Great Commission.

Furthermore, as Birkey (1991, p.3) reminds us, "the future growth of Christianity in the Third World depends to a large extent on how women are incorporated into the total life and ministry of the church."

- d. *The house church was a culturally relevant model.* Small group gatherings were a generally accepted phenomenon in the context of the ancient world. House churches provided a decentralized missionary freedom for creative expression within cultural diversity.
- e. *The church in the home provided the most dynamic setting for the distinctively unique Christian fellowship and worship.* These early Christians were not ultimately dependent on temple or synagogue as far as worship and fellowship were concerned. Birkey reminds us of McGavran's words (cited in 1991, p.4), "the physical fact of the house church should be taken into consideration in any assessment of the causes of the growth of the early church."
Also Tidball's comment (cited in 1991, p.4), "Limitations to mission arise because (1) much energy, time, finance and personnel is invested in keeping a building in good repair; (2) public buildings are inflexible in their use and location; (3) they are impersonal especially when compared with homes and (4) they emphasise the need for people to come to a strange place in order to receive the gospel thus making an additional barrier between the hearer and the good news."
- f. *The house church positively influenced the development of church leaders.* It imparted rather than inherited leadership, it provided 'natural leadership.' Filson (cited in 1991, p.4) has indicated that Gentile church hosts were often 'God-fearers,' suggesting that they were persons of sufficient education and practical ability to help train up the leaders of the young church. Birkey makes a plea for releasing 'the other one-half of the church' into greater leadership freedom in all areas of church and mission.
- g. *The house church strengthened the concept of corporate solidarity in Christian conversion.* Household conversions were common (Acts 10:1-2, 16:13-15, 31-34, 18:18), they were a communal experience and therefore also led to a missional commitment of the body within and outside of the church.

- h. *The house churches were the embodiment of biblical and Christian hospitality.* Hospitality was regarded as a virtue since the most ancient of times among all peoples. Malherbe has said (cited in 1991, p.5), "the theological implications of hospitality as practised by the early church still await our attention."
- i. *The household as church afforded the basic solution to the problem of early missionary strategy.* Paul's missionary strategy, at its simplest, was a strategy of households. Sine has stated (cited in 1991, p.5), "Biblical and missiological studies cannot ignore the fact that the movement which conquered the Roman Empire was in reality a movement of small house churches. Furthermore, over the centuries much of the renewal and outreach of the church has come through small communities and house church, movements in which persons were organically linked to one another in a common purpose."
 Birkey refers to Snyder here (cited in 1991, p.5), "A small group of eight to twelve people meeting together informally in homes is the most effective structure for the communication of the gospel in modern secular-urban society. Such groups are better suited to the mission of the church in today's urban world than are traditional church services, institutional church programs, or the mass communication media."

4.3.

The house church and the 'marginalised.'

4.3.1.

Snyder (1996, pp.40ff), writing about 'The Gospel to the Poor Today,' points out that *Like her Master, the Church must place special emphasis on **the poor*** [my emphasis]. A biblical theology for today must reflect the biblical concern for the poor. "This truth must be urgently affirmed today because contemporary Protestantism is, in general, neglecting poorer people."

Kendrick (cited in 1996, p.41) has written, "Instead of seeking the lost sheep – whether black or white or speckled – (Protestants) sought out those who thought as they thought, and dressed as they dressed, and talked as they talked." Instead of seeking the poor,

the church “was cutting itself off from them and neglecting the fact that the sign of the Kingdom is that the poor have the gospel preached to them.”¹⁷⁶

Snyder (1996, pp.40ff) has a helpful section on *prioritising ministry to the poor*, not only because it is biblical, but because the poor often respond more readily to the message – we can cite historical and sociological evidence for this. Troeltsch (cited in 1996, p.43) observed 80 years ago,

“The really creative, church-forming religious movements are the work of the lower strata... Need upon the one hand and the absence of an all-relativizing culture of reflection on the other hand are at home only in these strata... The Early Church sought and won her new adherents chiefly among the lower classes in the cities ... members of the well-to-do, educated upper classes only began to enter the Church in the second century, and then only gradually.”

Tertullian (cited in 1996, p.43) could say in the second century, “The uneducated are always a majority with us.”

John Wesley (cited in 1996, p.43) said in 1771, “Everywhere we find the labouring part of mankind the readiest to receive the gospel.”

There is another example from history (1996, p.43) – Judson (missionary to Burma) sought out the higher class Burmese as the people to evangelize. But along the way he took in a poor member of the despised and uneducated Karen tribe. This man became a thorough Christian and began carrying the gospel to his own people. The result was that great numbers of Karens turned to follow Christ while relatively little fruit was seen by Judson among the elite.

In his study of church growth in Brazil, Read (cited in 1996, p.44) noted a similar pattern, especially among Pentecostals: “People in the lower strata of Brazilian society generally accept the Christian message more readily than the more privileged who are found in the upper classes.”

¹⁷⁶ Try and motivate an average, largely-white, middle-class, suburban church to visit the townships and see the needs firsthand, and you will find, generally, that the response is extremely poor to say the least.

It is no secret that many of today's largest denominations – hardly now to be classed as poor – had their beginning as Christ-ward movements among the lower classes. The period of phenomenal growth came during those years when the gospel was preached to the poor.

Simson (2006, pp.9-10) points out that approximately 70% of the world is young and poor.¹⁷⁷ [This of course is very applicable to our native Africa: e.g. by now all of us are familiar with the AIDS pandemic challenges in Africa, South Africa and specifically here in the Eastern Cape¹⁷⁸].

DeSilva (1991, pp.274ff) writes of how the house church movement caught on among Sri Lanka's urban and rural poor. Healings and deliverance from dark forces took place regularly.

4.3.2.

Chirwa (2005, p.82), writing in the context of his native Malawi says that nothing has impacted the Malawian nation more than the issue of **HIV/AIDS** [my emphasis]. He cites (in 2005, p.86) the *bureaucracy of institutional churches* bringing about an extremely slow response to the pandemic:

“Miss Kariye tells a sad story of a church with several institutions: a school, hospital and a theological college. About forty out of fifty students who donated blood were HIV-positive. When she asked to introduce an HIV programme with a curriculum, do model teaching for the first year, train their teachers who want to teach it and provide the support materials, she was disappointed with the answer. ‘This issue has to go before council A, then

¹⁷⁷ It was this fact that challenged the writer some years ago to give what remains of his life to ministry among the poor and disadvantaged youth of SA.

¹⁷⁸ Weekend Post edition of 07/07/2007, article “*Aids victims cast aside to die alone as disease stigma stays.*” The article relates, among many cases, a particular case where a patient's husband had an affair with her mother, then he and the family left his wife to die alone in an East London shack, with rats gnawing at her while still alive. On the other hand we have seen the change in people when brought to a Port Elizabeth township house church/care house, where they have been restored through love and medication or at least died with dignity and a knowledge of Christ.

council B and lastly council C before it goes to the AGM,' she was told. She wondered, 'How many will have died without a sense of urgency while they have to go through all the bureaucracy?'"

Chirwa (2005, p.88) adds that the church unfortunately, which should be known for compassion, has often sadly been known only for judgment. Yes, there is a role for pastors to play in combating the disease but the task is too great for them alone - hence *lay-training and involvement* is essential despite problems of confidentiality in village culture.

Chirwa (2005, pp.89-90) calls for *incarnational lifestyle* and *wisdom to counsel small groups* [my emphasis] rather than individuals because of collective community thinking that makes up African society at large. This will also require the building of *relationships* in every instance (2005, p.93). Churches should encourage the setting up of HIV/AIDS support groups, start a lay-counselling ministry, etc (2005, p.97).

4.3.3.

Do we always grasp *who the poor/marginalised are?*

R and J Banks (1998, p.231) wrote that mission requires us to be *sensitive to all groups in society, especially to those who have the least voice and the greatest need*. They refer to Prior (cited in 1998, pp.231-232),

"It is clear, therefore, that after the example of Jesus we should be seeking out the needy and the *marginalised* [my emphasis], while being sensitive and straight with those who cross our path who are not so clearly in need. Here is it right to say that in Africa and Latin America, the needs of the underprivileged are blatant and overwhelming... But who are the needy in Europe and North America? Whom should the church, and in particular our *home churches*, be seeking out? Because the majority of people who cross our paths do not have such blatant needs, in what direction should we deliberately move in order 'to seek and to save the lost'? Of course, the needy are not exclusively the materially impoverished. The marginalised are not only those in slums... but all whose background or occupation pushes them to the margins of society."

R and J Banks (1998, p.232) then mention some examples of the latter: single-parent families, the elderly or incapacitated, unmarried mothers, children, the unemployed, immigrants, addicts, and ex-prisoners. “Precisely because *home churches* [my emphasis] and their congregations provide a closely knit, practically oriented support system, they have something special to offer such people...” (1998, p.232).

5.

HOUSE CHURCH AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION ¹⁷⁹ [House church, mission and transformation are inseparable].

Gehring (2004, pp.266-267) gives a *house church perspective* on the issue of *mission and transformation*. In the pastoral epistles we encounter Christians who exemplify a household, well ordered through God and in Christ, to a pagan, urban society. In their families and in their house churches they are expected to be an illustration of order and an example of quiet civil loyalty and faithfulness, inwardly and outwardly. It is precisely this behaviour that makes them so effective in their missional outreach (1 Tim. 2:4; 3:15; Tit. 3:8). Thus one of the strengths of the house church in terms of its significance for early Christian missions again becomes evident, similar to what we have observed in the primitive Jerusalem church and in the Pauline churches.

¹⁷⁹ Recently, in the ‘Diary’ of the British *The Times* of Dec. 27th 2008, an amazing comment by Matthew Parris [journalist with *The Times* until 2001, Foreign Office worker and MP (1979-86), publisher, literary prize-winner, etc] appeared, entitled ‘As an atheist, I truly believe Africa needs God.’ Parris recently returned to his place of birth and early childhood, Malawi, and writes of his impressions of the intervening years. He concludes, ‘Missionaries, not aid money, are the solution to Africa’s biggest problem –the crushing passivity of the people’s mindset. Among other things he says, ‘Now a confirmed atheist, I’ve become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGO’s, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people’s hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good. I used to avoid this truth by applauding – as you can – the practical work of mission churches in Africa. It’s a pity, I would say, that salvation is part of the package, but Christians, black and white, working in Africa, do heal the sick, do teach people to read and write; and only the severest kind of secularist could see a mission hospital or school and say the world would be better without it. I would allow that if faith was needed to motivate the missionaries to help, then fine: but what counted was the help, not the faith. But this doesn’t fit the facts. Faith does more than support the missionary; it is also transferred to his flock. This is the effect that matters immensely, and which I cannot help observing.’ He tells of how you could always mark out the Christians: ‘Far from having cowed or confined its converts, their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world – a directness in their dealings with others – that seemed to be missing in traditional African life. They stood tall...’ He goes on to speak of their hospitality, individuality amid their community, sense of purpose and peace, etc.

Cullmann (1956, p.202), writing on the early church and social conditions, rightly pointed out that the gospel does not begin by formulating a social policy. The first change must take place in individual men and women: social changes will then result. He (1956:202) asks, "Is it not necessary to change institutions first in order to change the human heart? One might think so. But such was certainly not the conviction of Paul and most Christians in the apostolic age."

Thus with regard to slavery Paul did not preach the suppression of slavery, but requires the abolition of all differences between slaves and masters within the Christian community, which must be extended more widely. The early Christians believed that when Christian brothers and sisters really attained the love of Christ toward one another, slavery would collapse automatically, even outside the Church.

From a Roman Catholic point of view, Dulles (1987, p.220) quotes a 1984 pastoral letter 'The Challenge of Peace' (put out by USA bishops),

"We readily recognise that we live in a world that is becoming increasingly estranged from Christian values. In order to remain Christian, one must take a resolute stand against many commonly accepted axioms of the world. To become true disciples, we must undergo a demanding course of induction into adult Christian community. We must continually equip ourselves to profess the full faith of the Church in an increasingly secularised world. We must develop a sense of solidarity, cemented by relationships with mature and exemplary Christians who represent Christ and his way of life."

On a practical note, Bakker (2005, p.220) has written recently on 'The Social Relevance of the Reconciliatory Message of the Kingdom.' She points out the problem of evangelical churches in our South African context having often had 'A Social Versus Spiritual Gospel' polarisation.

"I have located part of the reason I have struggled with the superficial ring that words like *reconciliation and transformation* have in our current context. Part of the reason is that our understanding of these words, primarily within

the church context, have been spiritualised and the focus has almost exclusively been on reconciling ourselves and others with God. We have often been taught that if our relationship with God is right, then our relationships with others will be too. The history of our country with prejudicial structures and high levels of abuse and crime have not supported this naïve approach to relational and moral responsibility, even though national statistics reveal that 68% of our population would claim a Christian status (www.statssa.gov.za). It would appear that the churches have often been presenting two gospels – a spiritual gospel focusing on our reconciliation with Christ or a social gospel with its focus on community reconciliation” (2005, p.220).

She quotes Pityana and Villa-Vicencio (cited in 2005, p.220) as follows, “Dualistic thinking of this nature is greatly reflected in the attitude of many Christians who do not understand the comprehensive social relevance of the gospel. We have reduced the salvation message to the soul’s relevance without consideration for earthly and contemporary liberation. We preach messages of reconciliation with an exclusive focus on the individual and heavenly implications, while communal and material needs remain unmet and unaddressed.”

Bakker (2005, pp.222-223) adds, “the church’s role in promoting community-focused reconciliation has sadly been neglected... The moral imperative of the church is to bring people into authentic relationship with God and with one another. In reflecting on the history of our faith communities in South Africa it has been evident that the church has been part of the problem as opposed to presenting the solution... The church still largely seems to reflect the social divisions of society that it seeks to address.”

5.1.

A plea for an ‘incarnational missiology’ in the church/house church.

Lundy (2005, p.7) makes a statement, ‘Incarnational ministry equals missional ministry.’ He calls us to *reconsider the form of witness of the early church*, which calls us to think

incarnation. He (2005, p.8) makes the practical point viz. that this should be such an example for us today – mingling with those unlike us (in terms language, social customs, music tastes, etc), associating with the disenfranchised and the poor, etc. Thus the application of the incarnational principle inherent in mission is that the gospel involves fulfilling the Great Commission (Mt. 28:16-20) and the Great Commandment (Lk. 4:18-19; cf. Jn. 13:34) (2005, p.10).¹⁸⁰

Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.40ff) have some excellent input, in the writer's judgment, on the need for an 'incarnational theology/missiology.' [while these authors may not be directly promoting house churches *per se*, their 'alternative faith communities' seem not dissimilar to many contemporary house churches in my estimation – certainly we note their firm rejection of 'Christendom mode' as far as relevance in the 21st century is concerned].

The authors (2003, pp.41ff) expound 'Attractional Versus Incarnational' as follows: The relationship between the traditional Christendom mode of church and the world around it can best be described as being fundamentally *attractional*. The church bids people to *come and hear* the gospel in the holy confines of the church and its community. This seems so natural to us after 17 centuries of Christendom, but at what price and to what avail have we allowed it to continue? If our actions imply that God is really only present in official church activities – worship, Bible studies, Christian youth meetings, ladies' fellowships – then it follows that mission and evangelism simply mean inviting people to church-related meetings.¹⁸¹ To put it bluntly, church activities such as those mentioned, instead of being genuine 'out-reach' effectively become 'in-drag.' Of course the authors are not suggesting that people cannot experience God in a church service. But if the church limits God's agency in this world to particular times and places that the vast majority of not-yet-Christians have little access to, or no desire to attend, then the gospel is effectively hobbled.

¹⁸⁰ Getz (1974, pp. 42-43) has a useful section highlighting the fact that evangelism takes place 'in the world,' and not in churches.

¹⁸¹ Any perusal of the NMBM church activities as displayed weekly on the excellent 'PE Church Net' reveals a plethora of the 'church functions' mentioned by Frost and Hirsch, powerfully illustrating their point of traditional churches being largely 'attractional' rather than 'incarnational.' In fact, if church activities alone indicated the spiritual health of the churches in the metro, we would score 10 out of 10!

“God becomes mute to the vast majority of people in the Western world, people who cannot interpret the church culture that has effectively imprisoned the good news within its cultural system. The only means to evangelise people becomes organizing little ‘patrols’ to go into the world in order to rescue them back to the safety of ‘church.’ Many westerners in our post-Christendom era report that they’ve tried church and found it wanting...” (2003, p.42).

If the people will not come to us, say the authors, we have to go to them. This approach, being *incarnational*, is the opposite of being *attractional* [my emphasis]. Instead of the above ‘come to us,’ the incarnational church seeks to infiltrate society to represent Christ in the world.

The writer’s point is this, if the Christendom model is not working at large in terms of mission, we have to resort to grassroots, intentional, incarnational faith communities (such as house churches) who more easily are able to touch and reach out to pockets of people who have little or no knowledge of Christ and His care (after all, these people live in the neighbourhood!).

The authors (2003, p.42) summarise this point as follows,

“we propose that a radical shift needs to take place in this time – a shift from the attractional mode to an incarnational one. This is no mean request, because the vast majority of churches in the West (ninety-five percent?) operate in a non-incarnational mode of mission. An incarnational mode creates a church that is a dynamic set of relationships, friendships and acquaintances. It enhances and ‘flavors’ the host community’s living social fabric rather than disaffirming it. It thus creates a medium of living relationships through which the gospel can travel. It emphasizes the importance of a group of Christians infiltrating a community, like salt and light, to make those creative connections with people where God-talk and

shared experience allows for real cross-cultural Christian mission to take place.”¹⁸²

As to the *theological base* of the above, Frost and Hirsch (2003, p.42) remind us:

- God constantly comes to those who are the most unlikely. Witness the Hebrews as the world’s outcasts.
- The OT story of Ruth is profoundly missional.¹⁸³
- “If we are to take incarnational mission seriously, then we must see that God’s future – his new creation – is not just among ‘his people’ (churchgoing Christians) but it is among the ‘ordinary’ people – the lost, strugglers, and listless ones of our world” (2003, p.42). This is where house church becomes so powerful [personal comment].

R and J Banks (1998, pp.242ff) have documented, for example, how *house churches* and interactive congregations are making a *broader social contribution* through the creation or renewal of rituals (e.g. celebrating a wide range of major life stages and experiences – birthdays, house moving, graduations, finding a job, etc). Other contributions include: providing surrogate families to deserted people, helping people establish a little business, ministry to senior public servants, etc.

“The well-known ethicist Hauerwas (cited in 1998, p.244) has pointed out that the democratic society in which we live did not begin primarily from abstract doctrines but arose from living experience of Puritan congregations who regarded themselves as a fellowship of equals under God. We do well to remember how much these *fairly small communities of believers, along*

¹⁸² Like my good friend, Ockie, a fellow-biker and house church member who belongs to a ‘secular’ motorbike club, who has had an amazing impact on some of the bikers, including their relationships, values, and behaviour.

¹⁸³ (a) According to E. Peterson (2002, p.449) in his introduction to the Book of Ruth: “The outsider Ruth was not born into the faith and felt no natural part of it... But she came to find herself gathered into the story and given a quiet and obscure part that proved critical to the way everything turned out. Scripture is a vast tapestry of God’s creating, saving, and blessing ways in this world...”

This outsider widow, a Moabitess, uprooted and obscure, turns out to be the great-grandmother of David and the ancestor of Jesus! (b) The whole point of the OT (see especially Isaiah) was that Israel should be ‘a light to the nations/Gentiles. (c) One cannot deal with the postmodern ‘house church’ in a vacuum, it is part of the ‘church universal’ – if Frost and Hirsch challenge the church to be incarnational/missional rather than attractional/invitational, this applies to the house church also.

with Quaker and Anabaptist groups, helped shape the wider civic and political context that we have inherited and that so much of the world has imitated” [my emphasis].

Vanier (cited in 1998, p.245) said, “Communities which live simply and without waste help people to discover a whole new way of life, which demands fewer financial resources but more commitment to relationships. Is there a better way to bridge the gulf which widens daily between rich and poor countries?”

The sociologist Christian Smith (cited in 1998, p.245) has shown the staggering amount of resources that would be freed up in the West if all our churches learned to travel light as do interactive congregations *based on home churches*” [my emphasis].

Lambert (1994, pp.237-238), writing about the Chinese church following the Beijing massacre, relates how, for example, “In Jiangsu, according to a PRC report, one country has 19,640 Protestant Christians meeting in seventy churches and meeting points, and *all the Christians are model citizens* [my emphasis], fulfilling their grain production quotas, obeying the government’s strict regulations on family planning (unlike many others!) and cremating, rather than burying, their dead, to conserve valuable land.

6.

HOUSE CHURCH AND CHURCH-PLANTING.

6.1.

Beside the spontaneous *oikos*-evangelism of the NT *ekklesia*, stands **NT church-planting through house churches.**

As Edwards (n.d., p.44) points out, the two central characters on the 1st century church stage were (a) God’s people; (b) the itinerant church-planter. Edwards indicates that while there may not be much direct teaching on the issue of church-planting, we have the evidence of the Acts-history and the epistles with regard to Paul as church-planter. For years church planting has been seen as the most effective way of church expansion and evangelism – Edwards (n.d., pp.26ff) is emphatic about the itinerant church planter

being one of the secrets of such expansion. Following the Acts 2 scenario with the *ekklesia* meeting more and more in private homes, God raised up believers to take the message into Judea, basically acting as church-planters. When we ask where these 12 church-planters got their ideas of itinerant ministry from, the answer is “from their Lord, who itinerated across Galilee for two years” (n.d., p.43). This practice of itinerant church-planting did not end in Judah but swept across the first three centuries of church history. “The travelling church planter – the extra-local worker, was a quintessential hallmark of the first-century *ekklesia*” (n.d., p.43).

Edwards (n.d., p.73) then mentions Paul and Timothy – Paul looked on his colleague as a church-planter. The churches did not need Timothy locally – there was enough capacity for local church ministry within the churches themselves – so Timothy travelled with other church-planters, which was how church-planters got their training in the early church. Edwards goes on to deal with (n.d., pp.63ff):

- *The length of the church-planter’s stay in a new church*: he cites the example of the church in Iconium. In four months the church is started and the two church-planters leave, the people in a sense ‘abandoned to Christ.’ It is the same in Lystra and Derbe. The two men then double back and visit the first three churches. By now elders are in place to continue the house church ministry. The church-planters then depart for Syria. Two years later they re-visit.
- *The secret was the local church ‘learning how to meet’* (n.d., p.64): with the help of the apostolic teaching, some oversight and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the early believers learned how to meet. The writer believes Edwards has a point which is very much missing in traditional churches today, hence the life-long dependence on ‘professionals’ and the resultant ‘spectator-syndrome’ of so many members. Edwards (n.d., pp.79-80) goes on to mention Paul’s three-week (only) stay in Philippi, etc. It was a kind of ‘sink-or-swim’ approach, but it evidently worked.
- *Training for church-planters* (already hinted at) *was essentially ‘watch-and-do’* (n.d., pp.94ff): they were converted and grew via the body-life type ministry of

the early house churches. They next showed some promise as workers who might truly be gifted and called of God for itinerant ministry. Paul then called them out of their local assemblies to go with him to Ephesus. They watched him raise up a church (they had already seen a church born, their own, in a different place and context). They had the privilege of exchanging stories about church-life in a half-dozen different cities and cultures. They watched the church grow in Ephesus and in the adjacent towns. Then they watched him – and helped him raise up churches in Asia Minor. Finally they were sent out on their own.

6.2.

A present-day example of church-planting through house churches.

We mention Simson's (newsletter of March 2001, p.1) account of how in 1997 he and Dr. Victor Choudrie put together a strategy to saturate Madhya Pradesh with multiplying house churches. Back then, this was a new and probably ridiculous idea. This State in middle India had less than 0.04% Christians.

“We brainstormed, prayed and strategised and ended up with a vision, that in 10 years, in AD 2007, there shall be 30,000 new house churches, 100,000 by AD 2015, and total saturation by AD 2020. It sounded a ridiculously huge vision then – but *it is now a fact that the goal of 2007 has been reached, even been surpassed*” [my emphasis].

In fact, the next Global House Church Summit was planned for November 2009, in New Delhi – people were invited from all over the world to come to India to inspire each other and share in the common vision of *seeing the whole planet being filled with God's presence and glory* through multiplying house churches (2009, p.1).¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ The Southern Baptist IMB has a helpful manual on church-planting among the nations, building on many of the principles of small groups and house churches. Viola has put out a helpful book, *So You Want To Start A House Church? (First-Century Styled Church Planting for Today)*.

Brother Yun and his colleagues (2003, pp.57ff) in the Chinese House Church Movement, in their *Back to Jerusalem* book with Paul Hattaway, detail their *total commitment to church-planting via house churches only*, especially in the pursuit of the Back to Jerusalem campaign.

“God has not only refined *us* in the fire of affliction for the past fifty years, he has also refined our methods. For example, we’re totally committed to planting groups of local believers. We have no desire to build a single church building anywhere! This allows the gospel to spread rapidly, is harder for the authorities [anti-Christian – my explanation] to detect, and enables us to channel all our resources directly into gospel ministry.”

Yun (2003, p.59) goes on to say that much of the ministry of Chinese missionaries in the Back to Jerusalem movement will take place in prison, with hundreds and perhaps thousands being arrested. However, imprisonment and even death will not mean failure, for the Chinese have often seen revivals break out in prison, thrusting out the message in new ways. The Chinese Christians have noticed that “the Western church with all its wealth and strength has not been able to make much of an impact in these nations” (i.e. between China and Jerusalem) (2003, p.60).

Yun (2003, p.91) adds that while the Chinese church is not strong in human terms (e.g. lots of money, grandiose schemes), they are like an army of little ants, worms and termites who know how to work underground. They are difficult to detect and not much is seen above-ground. “You will not see any great or small church buildings resulting from our efforts because we are determined to do what the Lord has led us to do in China these past fifty years and *establish spiritual fellowships of believers who meet in their homes*” (my emphasis) (2003:91).

Later Yun (2003, p.108) makes mention that this pattern is non-denominational and that it *derives from the pattern of the first church in the NT* – see, for example Acts 5:42, 2:20; Romans 16:5.

7.

THE HOUSE CHURCH AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT.

7.1.

The ineffectiveness of much traditional/institutional church leadership training.

Here we refer again to one of the best pieces of research ever done on the matter of church growth/development, viz. that of Christian Schwarz and his German-based team, who propose an approach they have called *Natural Church Development*. His (2003, pp.22ff) conclusions, presented in his book with the same title (subtitle – *A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*), are based on the most comprehensive study ever conducted on the causes of church growth.¹⁸⁵ The most important finding? The true causes of church growth are not what we have often believed them to be. Emerging from this comprehensive research, the team arrived at *eight essential qualities evident in all growing (healthy) churches, i.e. growing qualitatively and quantitatively*. They include (2003, pp.22ff):

- ***Empowering leadership*** [our particular interest at this point]
- *Gift-oriented ministry*
- *Passionate spirituality*
- *Functional structures*
- *Inspiring worship services*
- ***Holistic small groups*** [our particular interest at this point]¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ To refresh our memories: more than 1,000 churches of all denominations in 32 countries on all six continents were surveyed, involving some 4.2. million survey-answers (2003, p.33).

¹⁸⁶ Schwarz (2003, pp.32-33) comments on *holistic small groups*: “One result of our research is highly provocative. We presented the following statement to the pastors we surveyed: ‘It is more important for us that someone be involved in a small group than attend church’... if we take a closer look at the results we notice that this ‘radical, fringe’ position is much more common in churches with above-average quality than in churches with below-average quality. This means that there is a greater tendency to give small groups priority over worship service attendance (in itself a strange alternative) in churches with a high quality index and in churches that are growing numerically. This still does not make the priority of small groups over worship services a church growth principle, for a principle is something that a church should not neglect under any circumstances. Nonetheless, it allows us to infer the level of importance given to small groups in growing churches: they are not a supplement, like a nice but dispensable hobby.... After we had processed all 4.2 million answers, we calculated which of the 170 variables had the most

- *Need-oriented evangelism*
- *Loving relationships*

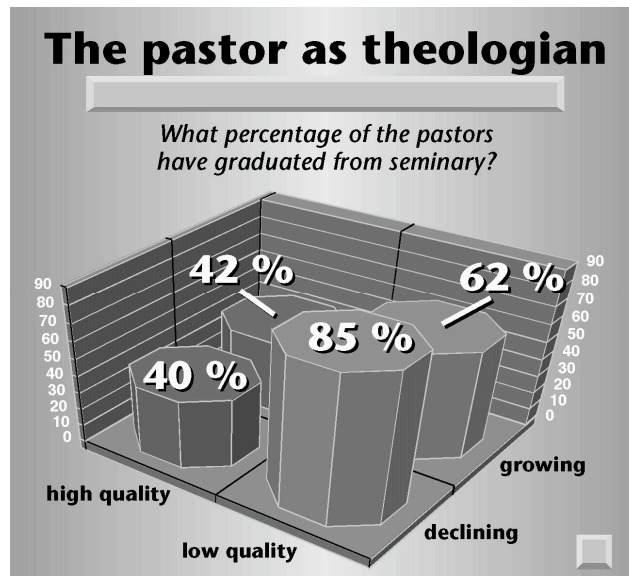
In the matter of *developing leadership*, the study (2003, p.22) revealed that

“the key distinction is probably expressed by the word ‘empowerment.’ Leaders of growing churches concentrate on empowering other Christians for ministry [note this major emphasis in house churches – my comment]. They do not use lay workers as ‘helpers’ in attaining their own visions [as for example in many mega-churches, led by very powerful visionary leaders – my comment]. Rather, they invert the pyramid of authority so that the leader assists Christians to attain the spiritual potential God has for them. These pastors equip, support, motivate, and mentor individuals, enabling them to become all that God wants them to be.”

[this principle is infinitely more practical in a small, house church setting, even compared to the average-sized traditional congregation where the pastor is so busy with administration issues that he simply does not have the necessary time to devote to individual members – my comment].

Another key-conclusion that emerged was this (2003, p.23): **Formal theological training has a negative correlation to both church quantitative and qualitative growth.** The following diagram, based on Schwarz’s research, illustrates the point:

significant relationship to church growth. It is probably no coincidence that our computer survey selected this in the area of ‘holistic small groups’ [very close to a definition of house church – my comment] ... If we were to identify any *one* principle as the ‘most important’ then without a doubt it would be *the multiplication of small groups*” [my emphasis].



The 42% column represents the number of pastors with a traditional theological education in churches that are both growing in number and in the eight quality characteristics. The 40% column represents churches that are growing in quality but their numbers are declining. The 62% column represents churches that are growing in number but have poor quality. The 85% column represents churches who are declining in number and quality.

[In summary, see my general viewpoint on some of the above issues in footnote 173 on page 278]

7.2.

We have much to learn from the NT house church's 'oikos-type' leadership.

Gehring (2004, p.266) has observed in the primitive church in Jerusalem and in the Pauline churches *oikos*-type leadership patterns from the *oikos* structures of the NT house churches. As responsible heads of households, they had already learned basic leadership tasks of administration, service and hospitality. "In the Pastoral Epistles, then,

we encounter Christians who are supposed to exemplify a household, well ordered through God and in Christ, to a pagan, urban society” (2004, p.266).¹⁸⁷

Viola (2008, p.192) has this to say about NT leadership: “Plainly stated, leadership in the early church was nonhierarchical, nonaristocratic, noninstitutional, and nonclerical. God’s idea of leadership is *functional, relational, organic, and communal* – just as it is in the Godhead.”

Viola (2008, p.192) continues, to have the leadership of the church functioning according to the same principles as that of a corporate executive in a business or an aristocrat in an imperial caste was never our Lord’s thought. It is for this reason that the NT authors never chose to use hierarchical and imperial metaphors to describe spiritual leadership. The NT authors deliberately depict leadership with images of slaves and children rather than lords and masters (Lk. 22:25-26). While such thinking comes in direct conflict with today’s popular practice of ‘spiritual authority,’ it meshes perfectly with the biblical teaching of the kingdom of God – the realm in which the weak are strong, the poor are rich, the humble are exalted, and the last are first (Lk. 6:20-26; Mt. 23:12; 20:16).

Furthermore (2008, p.193), the early church did not operate like our contemporary democracy – many mistakenly think that our Western democratic system is rooted in biblical theology. There is not a single example in the entire NT where church decisions were made by a show of hands. Granted, every Christian is equal in spiritual life, but each has a different gift (Rom. 12:3-8). The church is not a pure democracy.¹⁸⁸ Viola (2008, pp.193-199) then goes to argue for church government by ‘consensus’ – as for

¹⁸⁷ According to Christensen (1986, p.8), the task of discipling Christians so that each one becomes a minister of the Gospel requires a leadership which *models a life-style ministry*. The teaching of the Gospel which equips for ministry must be followed by shepherds deeply into people’s lives. Church people should have proper models for that kind of ministry. Where there is an incarnational demonstration, the message can be heard more readily. Elders/shepherds must be trained to model discipleship through the particulars of daily living. I John 1:3.

¹⁸⁸ In the writer’s own denomination, church matters have often been dealt with in typical democratic style, with shows of hands/ballots, etc. Often votes are swung this way and that by lobbying, the will of a vocal minority is easily imposed on ‘the silent majority,’ etc, causing much mischief and hurt to members and leaders. The writer has witnessed the same in other congregations and many of his colleagues would quietly concur with him on this issue.

example in Acts 15:22, 25 (NASB), 'Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church... it seemed good to us, having become of one mind.'

Lundy (2005, p.171) underlines the importance of *leaders learning from the early church*. We face a paradox as we enter the 21st century. The challenges of globalization, post-Christendom, religious pluralism, civilization wars, and post-modernity plead for apostolic leaders in the church, not small-minded or inward-looking ones. McNeal contends (cited in 2005, p.171), "Many of today's Christian leaders, faced with similar challenges to those of the first apostles, *will draw on leadership practices and principles of the initial leaders of the Christian movement*" [my emphasis]. They will be servant-leaders, facilitating their own people into doing the ministry and thus equipping them to face a desperate and decaying culture with confidence and faith; they will be missional, not concerned with preserving the status quo so much as being kingdom-minded, facing outward and not inward, being luminous; they will guard and cultivate their own spiritual formation so that others are inspired and drawn to the God they follow; they will be tools not merely of their local churches but of something far bigger, viz. of the kingdom of God.

7.3.

House churches more easily/naturally raise up church leaders.

Hadaway and Wright and DuBose (1987, pp.171ff) have underlined the principle that *in the house church ethos, leadership is a much simpler and more workable thing*. It is built on the decentralization of authority and decision-making. It is essentially a lay-movement, with participants generally adhering to the priesthood of all believers. Laity are impelled to assume active roles in small groups (1987, p.174). They are urged to find and employ their spiritual gifts for the purpose of ministering to the needs of others. Each believer becomes a minister or labourer, and no one is made to feel spiritually inadequate or inferior because he or she lacks credentials or professional training.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ The writer holds nothing against credentials and 'professional training' (he himself benefitted by these) and he certainly does not under-estimate the value of centuries of good Christian tradition. It surely is a matter of **balance** – what does one say, for example, about the CH Spurgeon's and Martyn Lloyd Jones's of this world, who taught themselves theology through intelligent study of the Bible and history, wide

This is in contrast to the passive observer who expects a professional class of clergy to perform all the work of the ministry. When groups grow and divide, new leaders are needed – thus there must exist some avenues by which able individuals may be cultivated for leadership and be given duties and responsibilities. A plurality of leadership is inherent in the house church model (1987, p.174). Leadership roles are necessarily multiplied throughout the body. “The house church movement demands an increase in the number of leaders. Furthermore, the apportionment or distribution of pastoral functions among the laity is necessarily a process of decentralisation” (1987, pp.174-175).

The authors (1987, pp.203ff) write of the *Efficiencies of Lay Leadership* as follows:

- The clergy-dominated Christianity of the Western world has widened the gap between clergy and laity in the body of Christ.
- The pastor-shepherd has evolved gradually into the role of clergy-performer hired by the church as their ‘Sunday-before-dinner speaker,’ witness to the community and sickbed comforter.

reading, study of the original languages, etc? Can such training be done in a house church context? Why not? (the writer, and many colleagues, who have had ‘formal theological training,’ are doing it) What about the Chinese house church, which has largely worked through the problems of heresy, often with the Bible and history as their only guide? (Calvin called the Bible ‘the school of the Holy Spirit’: Protestant Reveille Vol. 64, Fourth Quarter, 2009). What does one mean by ‘real theological training?’

M. Douglas Meeks (Moltmann, 1978, p.16), in his introduction to Moltmann’s *The Open Church*, says, “It is indeed eventful when a major German systematic theologian attempts to do theology from the perspective of a layperson in the congregation. The split between academic theology and the experience of ordinary Christians may not be once and for all overcome in this book, but Jürgen Moltmann has set out here with the clear recognition of the futility of a Christian theology which is not devoted to the life of the congregation. Modern theology has often given lip service to Christian theology’s dependence on the church.” He goes on to mention how the calls of Schleiermacher, Barth and Tillich for this congregational approach to theology have largely been ignored. (As a matter of interest, Moltmann, encouraged by the rising up of voluntary, grassroots, ‘open’ communities in the 1970’s (including student communities, action groups, etc., reaching out to the broken and needy), laments that ‘society and church often do not recognize these new communities but mistrustfully repress them” (1978, p.34).

Peterson (a Presbyterian!) (2007, p.12), dealing with ‘the purification of means’ in the church and exposing what he calls the ‘laity myth,’ reminds us that “There is at least one area of life in which we are not ‘just a layperson.’ If I am a mechanic, I know more about the car you drive than you do. If I am a physician, I know more about your body than you do. When I have a stethoscope around my neck and a scalpel in my hand I am not a layperson... *But in the company of Christians, that hierarchy of expertise simply doesn’t work. There are no experts in the company of Jesus* (my emphasis). We are all beginners, necessarily followers, because we don’t know where we are going. On reflection it is difficult to understand how the term ‘laity’ and the assumptions drawn from it *continue to marginalize so many Christians from all-out participation in following Jesus. After all, didn’t Jesus call only laypersons to follow him? Not a priest or professor among the twelve men and numerous women followers. And Paul, the tentmaker*” (my emphasis) (2007, p.12). (in fairness. it must be said that Paul was also a trained Pharisee).

- In the past there has been little challenge or necessity to develop lay leadership in most mainline churches. House churches reverse the direction of this trend towards professional leadership and put a primary emphasis on the lay leader.
- Many contemporary house church models use women at any level of leadership.
190
- Lay leaders often grow to greater depth. The very nature of a small group requires a higher commitment level than that which tends to exist in larger, less defined, more impersonal churches.

To *summarise* the view of Hadaway and Wright and DuBose (1987, pp.68-69) – in the apostolic period, it was the apostles who gave general guidance to the life of the house churches: the original eleven under the leadership of James in Judea and Paul in the Gentile world with Peter moving somewhat in both worlds. There was a certain authority which emanated from their ministries. Otherwise, leadership in the churches centred in the host and/or leader of the house church. A variety of leadership roles and functions existed in the various house congregations: bishops (overseers), pastors, elders, prophets, teachers and deacons. There may have been some distinction among the functions of bishops, or elders, or deacons; but these roles were not formalized in a definitive way in the NT era. There seems to have been a plurality of leaders in each congregation – certainly in each community of house churches in a given city. Moreover, these titles of leadership often seemed interchangeable with the same leaders being designated by more than one title. “*What seems clear in the New Testament is that next to the apostles themselves, the house church leaders were the most important in terms of the ongoing life of the church*” [my italics] (1987, p.69).

No doubt some of the house church leaders were also bishops or elders.

¹⁹⁰ Lambert has pointed out how many churches/house churches in China today are under the leadership of *women*.

7.4.

House churches and the de-centralisation of leadership authority. [note the 'control mentality' of church leaders, evident in so many churches today].

Garrison (1999, p.39) has noted that, in the development of the early church as described in the Book of Acts and the epistles, there seems to be no heavy centralisation of leadership or hierarchical structure. One of the ten common factors identified by the International Missions Board of the Southern Baptists in the USA indicates that commonly:

“Leadership authority is decentralized. Denominations and church structures that impose a hierarchy of authority or require bureaucratic decision-making are ill-suited to handle the dynamism of a Church Planting Movement. It is important that every cell or house church leader has all the *authority* [my italics] required to do whatever needs to be done in terms of evangelism, ministry and new church planting without seeking approval from a church hierarchy.”

On the problem of “control” Garrison (1999, p.46) has stated that when Baptist Union leaders “have a vision for church multiplication that *exceeds their need for control*” [my italics, they can greatly facilitate the church-planting movement.”^{191 192 193}

[Bonhoeffer (1984, pp.31ff,36) typically declared that exerting power over others is not fellowship – power is based on *eros* and fellowship on *agape*. It demands that I release

¹⁹¹ Talking about the problem of 'control' in churches, the writer loves the way Annes Nel (2003, p.57) puts it, tongue in cheek: "each church has 'it's sheriff!'"

¹⁹² Simson cites Warren (in 1998, p.146), "For a church to grow, both the pastor and the people must give up control."

¹⁹³ Banks (1998, p.92) states that the reason why so many house churches appear independent and are often unattached to a traditional church, is the 'control' of leaders who are resistant to change and feel threatened by it. As Anglican David Prior put it (cited in 1998, p.92): "For many pastors and ministers, including bishops and archbishops, such home church life is very threatening. The reasons for this fear are profound and manifold. Clergy have not been trained to operate in this way. Orthodoxy in doctrine is usually seen to be of prime importance, and such home churches look like potential seedbeds of heresy. The human need to control situations for which we are held responsible becomes very urgent. There is, moreover, a crisis of identity and role amongst most clergy today. For many, uncomfortable experience of small groups in the past obstructs openness to the Spirit now. Even when scope is given for this pattern of church life, it is very tempting to keep tight control even while decentralizing and delegating. To many clergy, delegation looks and feels like abdication, especially when the actual teething troubles begin." David Prior used house churches (in the 1970's) very successfully over a period of years as the base for St. John's Parish in Wynberg, Cape Town. Thus he is able to relate both sides of the story!

my brothers from every form of manipulation and domination, and give them freedom in Christ].

7.5.

Common 'church leadership trends' today.

R and J Banks (1998, pp.67-68) refer us to Richards' *A New Face for the Church* in which he saw the following trends emerging with regard to churches and leadership:

- The smallest churches are neighbourhood gatherings, no larger than can comfortably fit into a home. In these meetings, all the functions of church take place, and this is the prime location for mutual ministry... as gifts emerge and are recognized, church leaders are selected.
- The church at times will assemble as a larger group for a variety of purposes, for the Sunday meeting, or to consider some problem facing it as a whole.
- The leaders of the church meet together... one or more may be supported to free them for full-time ministry... "*There is no one prominent person in the local fellowship: no single pastor to whom we all look!*" [my italics] (1998, p.68).

7.6.

Contrasting traditional, pastor-led congregations with elder-led house churches, the latter being mentored by the 'five-fold ministries' of Ephesians 4:11.

Simson quotes Coombes (1998, p.36) as follows,

"Nowhere in the New Testament do we find references to a pastor leading a congregation." The house church does not need a pastor in the traditional sense, because elders, functioning together with the corporate giftedness of the house church, maintain and multiply the life of the church. This also breaks the clergy-laity division, which the congregational system reinforces. Furthermore (1998, pp.75-76) when churches are established merely with pastoral, teaching and evangelistic functions (i.e. without apostolic/prophetic functions – see Eph. 4:11), the result often is churches built around the ministry of the pastor-teacher (1998, pp.38,59). "These teaching-oriented,

pastoral and evangelistic models of church, although they have filled whole countries, have not truly disciplined them” (1998, p.76).

Snyder (2004, pp.110ff), in a section on *pastors and teachers*, says “There is nothing in Ephesians 4 (or elsewhere in the New Testament) to suggest that *pastor* in the early church had anything like the highly specialised and professional sense it later came to have in Protestantism.”

Ephesians 4:11 is, in fact, the only occurrence of the word *pastors* in the sense of congregational leaders, although the idea of a flock to be cared for occurs in John 21:16, Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2. Jesus of course is *the* Pastor of God’s people.

Edwards (2007, p.1) claims it was Pope Gregory the Great who first popularized the term ‘pastor’ in about 550 AD – he did so by writing a book on the pastoral duties of the priest. The term ‘pastor’ appears in no Christian literature before that point other than once in a long list of people mentioned in the book of Ephesians. Edwards (2007, p.2) adds, “If we removed the present pastoral role from Christendom, there would be an almost total collapse of ‘church’ worldwide.”

7.6.1.

We define the mentoring rôle of the ‘five-fold gifts’ of Ephesians 4:11.

Snyder (2004, pp.103ff) has the following to say about the function of ‘**apostles**’ in the church today:

- According to Paul the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ being the chief cornerstone (Eph.2:20).
- In the early church an apostle was one recognized as having a place of pre-eminent leadership and authority in the church - their qualifications were direct contact with/commissioning by the Christ. They often played a key-role in cross-cultural evangelism.

- The argument that apostleship in terms of function ceased with the NT does not hold water. The word 'apostle' or 'apostles' occurs 81 times in the NT. Beginning with Acts 8, we can no longer be sure that the term refers only to the Twelve. Gradually the term expands to include other emerging church leaders: hence also James the brother of Jesus, Apollos, Silas, possibly Adronicus and Junia.
- The NT uses the term even more broadly, i.e. of messengers and missionaries (Jn. 13:16; 2 Cor.8:23; Phil. 2:25).
- 'Apostleship' is a spiritual gift (1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11).
- "Clearly the New Testament does not teach that the apostolic ministry passed away with the death of the original Twelve. Nor, conversely, is there biblical evidence that the apostolic ministry was transmitted by human hands down through the history of the church. Rather, Scripture teaches that the Spirit continually and charismatically gives to the church the function of apostle... Apostles, then, usually are: (1) general leaders of the church; (2) whose place and authority are recognised throughout the church; (3) because of a consensual conviction that the Spirit of God has raised them up" (2004, pp.105-106). Apostleship is a function, a gift, rather than an office (2004:107).

Snyder on the function of **prophets** today (2004, pp.107ff):

- Barclay (cited in 2004, pp.107-108) noted regarding prophets in the early church, "The prophets were wanderers throughout the Church. Their message was held not to be the result of thought and study, but the direct result of the Holy Spirit... They went from Church to Church proclaiming the will of God as God had told it to them."
- Paul's use of the term in Ephesians and elsewhere makes it clear that prophets, like apostles, were recognized as having a general and pre-eminent ministry throughout the church.
- Who are the prophets today? There is biblical provision for charismatic leaders who emerge within the community, genuinely men and women of God, filled with

the Spirit (false prophets abound), etc. Their ministry will be one of direct relationship to God and the church. “As in the Bible, so in the church: the prophet is God’s instrument speaking directly to his people (and perhaps to the world) with encouragement, exhortation, warning or judgment, according to the situation. The validity of the prophetic message does not depend upon approval or acceptance by the church. The message, however, is valid only if in harmony with the Bible, because the Spirit of God is a Spirit of order, not confusion. God does not contradict himself. Yet prophets may help us understand the Word aright” (2004, p.109).¹⁹⁴

7.6.2.

The fact is that **the five-fold ministry according to Ephesians 4:11ff, including the somewhat neglected *functions* of apostle and prophet, play an important and advantageous rôle in the contemporary house church movement**, in terms of edification of the church for the work of the ministry (Eph. 4). (we must point out this ministry is not just characteristic of certain denominations and the house church movement – it is more and more functioning throughout the wider body of Christ, although perhaps not always recognised as doing so)

Simson sees this ministry as follows (1998, pp.110ff):

- *It empowers the church to fulfil her ministry in terms of Ephesians 4:11ff.* The five ministries are part of the built-in ‘biotic growth potential,’ an internal structure, part of the spiritual *DNA* of the church.¹⁹⁵
- *The five-fold ministries can also multiply themselves* (1998, p.110): apostles spotting and training other apostles, prophets spotting and training other

¹⁹⁴ Snyder (2004, pp.125ff,135) has helpful teaching on the prophetic role of the church in our day, e.g. in the ministry of reconciliation among peoples as well as in working for justice in society. Space does not allow us to go into this material at this point.

¹⁹⁵ Coates (cited in Simson 1998, pp.112-113) has compared (somewhat simplistically?) the five-fold ministry to the five fingers of the hand: the apostle is the thumb, giving stability and balance, able to touch all the other fingers; the prophet is the index finger, ‘You are the man!’ the evangelist is the middle finger, the longest of all and sticking furthest out into the world; the ring-finger resembles the pastor/shepherd, caring for internal relationships; the little finger is the teacher: it can worm its way into any ear, and there share the truth of the gospel!

prophets, and multiplying themselves through the simple and biblical process of discipleship.

- *We need a balance of these ministries/functions:* for example, if you leave a teacher to develop a church all by himself, he will generally build it around his unique gifting of teaching. He might convert a church into a lecture hall, or plant Bible schools or other teaching centres. A teacher does not really lay foundations; but he explains them brilliantly... (1998, p.117).
- *Apostles and prophets play a predominant role in church-planting:* “Important though spiritual hospitals may be, they cannot replace what apostles and prophets are uniquely gifted for: to build a supernatural base and foundation for a multiplying church movement, to accept nothing as impossible... They do not want to build ‘a church,’ they want the whole city or nation! They live in the future, from the future, constantly pregnant with future developments, and they can therefore pull the church into the future, and prevent it from becoming a traditional institution only celebrating the past, or a fossilized monument of history long gone” (1998, pp.118-119).
- *The elders* ¹⁹⁶ *in the local church are equipped by people who have been called by God to one of the fivefold ministries, viz. apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers:* “Those ministers circulate within the house churches ‘from house to house’ and function as a spiritual blood-circulation system nurturing the house churches with the elements necessary to become or remain healthy and therefore to multiply.” ¹⁹⁷ ¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Grudem has fuller teaching on the subject of ‘elders’ (1994, pp.912ff): (a) No NT passage suggests that any church, no matter how small, had only one elder – the NT assumes a plurality of elders in every church and town (Acts 14:23 & Tit. 1:5). (b) The NT teaches a uniformity of church government, a unified and consistent pattern – every church had elders governing and caring for it (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:2-3). (c) Elders are also called pastors, overseers and bishops.

¹⁹⁷ It must again be realized, from my observation of house churches functioning in different parts of the world as well as locally in my personal experience, that these ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets’ (there is no emphasis on the title, which is mostly avoided in house churches) operate very horizontally and relationally, not in any hierarchical way. They exercise their ministry by suggestion and invitation, and on the basis of trusted relationships that have stood the test of time, character and Scripture.

¹⁹⁸ This approach is indeed practised in churches *outside* of the house church movement – my experience has been that it is seldom practised with the balance and non-hierarchical/relational approach I have witnessed in house churches here or overseas. (speaking as an ‘evangelical,’ how many churches do we

- *Simson relates spiritual equippers of the five-fold ministry to a third group he calls 'apostolic fathers' (1998, pp.123ff): i.e. people with an apostolic calling and prophetic gifting who may operate in certain regions and nations – they are usually recognised by the almost unbearable agony and spiritual pain they have borne for a region or nation or people-group (Gal. 2:7-9). They are those who have a kingdom mentality, a broken spirit because of the burdens they have carried, servants who serve one and all in the body of Christ, not hierarchically but alongside God's people. (the writer suggests that the house church 'uncles' of the Chinese church may be good examples of what Simson is talking about here)*

199

8.

The training of church leaders *today*.

We have already indicated at various points the need for training-on-the-job – to a large extent this is the methodology of the house church movement (however, you will find many in leadership positions in the movement who have some of the finest theological training and qualifications you can find – many of them have held professorships at top-class universities and seminaries, etc.)

The writer's conviction is that 'every believer is a theologian' (some good, some bad!) and should try to qualify as much as possible. The writer will ever be grateful for his excellent seminary training, however much it failed me in terms of practical, hands-on ministry as a pastor-teacher. However, in the times we live in, the writer heartily endorses in-service training (practical and theological) for the leadership of the church.

know of that truly practise this principle?) (remember that Simson is one of the more prominent leaders in the house church movement today)

¹⁹⁹ The writer sees something of this principle historically in John Wesley and the Methodists, Gerhard Oncken and the German Baptists in Europe, Dr. Hugo Gutsche and South African Baptists, John G. Lake of the AFM, etc. (by the way, certainly Wesley and Hugo Gutsche practised a 'house church approach' in evangelism and church-planting)

8.1.

Watson (1978, pp.267-268), writing on ministry and leadership, has some good input here:

“We should in no way despise nor belittle the value of careful and painstaking theological study. But such an academic approach is by no means necessary in every case for a powerful and effective ministry. Over the years I have met hundreds of men and women who have had no formal theological training at all, but who, through the prayerful study of the Scriptures have a profound grasp of many spiritual issues. They have learnt to apply these truths to their lives and relationships, and they have been given by God an increasingly fruitful ministry. I am certain that some of these Christian workers might well have become *less* effective had they undertaken an academic course of study.

Is there any good reason for removing all who might be used by God in ministry for three years from their local church setting, filling their minds with theology (much of which they may never need to use in daily work), and then sending them to serve their apprenticeship in an area they probably know nothing about? In the early church *the leaders were nearly always appointed from the area in which they served* (my italics). They had the advantage of knowing the local scene intimately, and were therefore naturally placed for fulfilling an effective pastoral and preaching ministry according to the gifts given to them by God. When the professional ordained minister moves around as frequently as he does in most churches, it is hardly surprising that it is extremely difficult to build up the strong and mature relationships that are necessary for the body of Christ to function properly.

Whether or not there has been any formal theological education, *the value of in-service training cannot be overemphasised* (my italics). With the growing wealth of books, study schemes and training courses available, this should not be too difficult in many countries, although further help could well be given by those with a recognised teaching gift in each area... many Christian

workers in different and often lonely parts of the world have benefited enormously in this way from more experienced teachers *whose ministry has been proved by a wider cross-section of the church*” [my emphasis].

8.1.2.

The need for *creative leadership* in the 21st century church.

Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.184-185) express the need for creative leadership in the 21st century – activating our dormant ‘right brain,’ using ‘creative type people’ in leadership (i.e. the artists, etc). They call to mind the age when British motorbikes²⁰⁰ led the market. The names of BSA, Norton and Triumph were synonymous with quality and desirability. Who remembers them now? Except for Triumph, which has brilliantly reinvented the name and the company, these other vehicles are collectors’ pieces. The companies refused to adapt, and so they died. David Bosch (cited in 2003, p.187) wrote in his classic *Transforming Mission*, “*The mission of the church needs constantly to be renewed and reconceived.*” Thus we need to (2003, pp.187-189) teach people to dream again, especially the poor... vision arises from the bottom up rather than from the top down. We as leaders are ‘midwives,’ catalysts of the community’s vision.

Obviously such leadership will demand risk and courage (2003, p.189). The authors refer us to Einstein (2003, p.189), “*The Kind of Thinking That Will Solve the World’s Problems Will Be of a Different Order to the Kind of Thinking That Created Them in the First Place.*” This is no easy feat (2003, pp.189-190), as it often amounts to “the ‘king’ of our beloved institutions being exposed as naked by the ‘child’ of the innovator. *But whatever the difficulties, it is absolutely necessary if we are to genuinely move from being a christendom church to being truly a missional one*” [my italics].²⁰¹ “*One of the most important lessons from history is that the renewal of the church always comes from*

²⁰⁰ The writer does!

²⁰¹ Frost & Hirsch (pp.190-193) include a fascinating study on the different stages in a paradigm shift, e.g. the last stage being that of the emergence of the new paradigm with resultant resistance of the dissenters because the institutionalists and their ‘sacred cows’ stand to lose too much. The authors add some interesting keys to paradigm shifting, with interesting questions like what happens when a can opener doesn’t open cans anymore? Is a church still a church when it doesn’t function like a church?

the fringes, and we mean always" [my italics] (2003, p.194). See, for example, the life and ministry of Jesus. Thus also note the contribution of the house church in this regard.

8.1.3.

House church and leadership – a conclusion.

All the above is important for the church, including *house churches*. While retaining the essential *DNA* structures of the NT house church, in today's era there needs to be constant adaptation, fine-tuning, etc., in order to remain on the cutting edge.

9.

HOUSE CHURCHES AND FAMILY TRANSFORMATION...

9.1.

Children and family are central to the church/house church because they are central to the universal family unit and God's salvation purpose in Christ. [we have already touched extensively on the importance of family to the church].

9.1.1.

Thus, for example, Gehring (2004, p.239), writing on the continuing influence of *oikos* structures (essentially the house church structure), points out, in that context, **the householder's responsibilities as a father**. Corresponding to his responsibility to love his wife, the father is to avoid provoking his children. The psychological sensitivity expressed here is surprisingly modern. It is striking as well to note that the emphasis is not on the authority, rights and privileges of the father in the home but on his responsibilities and duties. So also, in Ephesians 6:4b, we have the instruction that children should be raised in the training and instruction of the Lord – here the responsibility of the father is to give Christian catechism to his children (the house church therefore simply reinforces the responsibility of the father in his *oikos*). The significance of the house church as the place for catechetical instruction becomes self-evident (see Deut. 6). In the end, as parents raise their children in the Christian faith, they are also making a significant contribution to building the church (cf. Eph. 6:4) (2004,

p.239). “Marriage and the family were extremely important for the early Christian movement, and by taking this view, they strengthened the household, which played such a key role in early Christian missional outreach. Therefore the strengthening of the family simultaneously strengthened the house church model for the missional building up of the church as a whole. A well-functioning household can only exist upon the foundation of a healthy, intact family. Hence a house church could only be established if a well-functioning family existed. It thus becomes clear that a close connection exists between the family as ordained in creation and the NT house church. This insight has significant consequences for present-day missional outreach and church development” [my emphasis] (2004, p.240).²⁰²

9.1.2.

Richards (in favour of small groups and ‘little house churches’: 1975, p.280), writing on ‘child education’ and the home as a nurture centre (1975, pp.190ff), stated that our contemporary approaches to teaching children in church are without question ‘classroom approaches,’ with concomitant deficiencies. One of the results is that “in our culture, classroom treatment of any subject matter tends to clue learners to process that content as academic. And the academic is perceived as ‘unreal’ in so far as present experiences, feelings, attitudes and values are concerned” (1975, p.191).²⁰³ This Richards sees as particularly tragic for Christian education in the local church. We communicate a revealed truth that must be perceived as life and integrated into life. He goes on (1975, pp.194ff), if we accept socialization as more appropriate than ‘education’ for communicating Christian faith as life, we are immediately forced to look to the *home* when we consider the Christian education of children.²⁰⁴ This may be one reason why organised ‘schooling’ in Christian faith for children is of relatively late appearance. In the OT the whole of the life of God’s people was organized to teach... the festivals, the

²⁰² Gehring (2004, pp.244-246) develops the role of husbands and wives in depth via an exegetical analysis of Ephesians 5:21-6:9 in the above context.

²⁰³ The writer personally has a problem with so-called ‘Christian schools’ in this regard (there are certainly some benefits) – they can so easily lead to a cognitive/academic perception of the faith, as well as a kind of ‘hot house’ environment divorced from the challenges and nitty-gritty of living in a world largely hostile to the gospel.

²⁰⁴ Richards is talking here, as the writer understands it, about a ‘schooling’ approach in traditional churches (e.g. in graded Sunday School classes, etc) (in contrast with that of Deut. 6), not about ‘home schooling,’ ‘Christian/church schools,’ etc.

laws, the daily patterns of work and worship. And it was to parents God said ‘you’ shall teach ‘your children.’ The NT makes no change in this basic strategy. “This, of course, poses a challenging problem for the Church. We know so much about how to ‘educate’ children in the classroom. But we know so little about how to help parents understand their socializing roles. How *do* we shift the focus of childhood education from the formal to the *informal learning setting*”? (my italics – also see the house church setting in this regard) ... How can we support parents as they nurture? We have curriculums for the classroom. Do we need an ‘at home’ curriculum?” (1975, p.195).

[can the reader begin to see the relevance of the house church setting where children learn by seeing, absorbing, experiencing and personalising God’s truth in Christ?].

9.1. 3.

R and J Banks build on what Richards has said above (1998, p.68). What is sought is the impact of each person’s life upon the others, of **faith being more than ‘handed down’ from one generation to another [there is place for that] but also being vitally/personally ‘caught’ throughout the generations.** This overcomes the segregation of children into narrow, graded groups and restores them to significant participation with adults in a nurturing environment viz. the home. When children are part of the same support group as their parents, their lives are touched in broader and deeper ways than in other settings. “*Only through home churching can children fully experience the biblical model for Christian education*” [my italics] (1998, p.68).

From the Banks’ experience of house churches and children, they started building on a number of principles (1998, p.205):

- *The responsibility for Christian education lies primarily with parents...*
- *As a small church we can become God’s family in a real sense and make the children as much a part of all that we do as everyone else.* Thus it becomes important to find new ways of integrating children into the life of the church.

How does one integrate *young children* into the house church? (1998, pp.207ff)

- Remember that younger children first learn to relate to God, their heavenly Parent, through us, their early parents.
- God calls the parents to explain God's Word to their children along the lines of Deuteronomy 6:20ff – not as those who have learnt to love God and their neighbour perfectly, but as those who along the way, making mistakes and asking forgiveness, growing in knowledge and wisdom.
- Fortunately for us as parents (1998, pp.208-209), the responsibility for children does not solely lie with us – the church has a secondary, but vital role. A house church begins this ministry by firstly ministering to the parents, encouraging their growth to maturity in all areas of life. It also happens in a more organised way by searching the Word on issues like discipline, etc. Books and DVD's are helpful here. A house church ministers to children through the prayers it offers for each child from the moment the group hears a baby is on the way. After the birth the house church welcomes the child through baptism or dedication, involving the whole cluster in a creative and moving way. In some house churches all adults accept the responsibility of becoming godparents to the child. As the children grow up they have additional models to the ones provided by their parents. From a very early age they learn that there is no set way of relating to God, that different types of people are Christian (middle-class, working class, intellectual, practical, mainstream, counter-culture, etc).
- R and J Banks (1998, pp.210ff) have a whole section on *Including Children in Gatherings*: e.g. making a family responsible for conducting the meeting, children and youth getting to choose the format of the meeting from time to time (e.g. a house church picnic or outing), including children in the Lord's Supper, etc.

What about *teenagers* in the house church? (1998, pp.209ff)

- During teenage years the quality of relationships between young people and adults becomes increasingly important. As young people 'separate' themselves from their parents, they find others in the house church to whom they can turn for advice about careers, friendships, romances, etc. There are others with whom they can discuss the latest movies, music, sport, etc. The absence of rigid

separation of age groups in a house church facilitates teenagers' transition into adult status in the group.

- Naturally some teens find it easier to make this transition than others. It depends on the group's attitude toward them, their relationship with their parents, etc. Even if one of them decides to drop out of the group, the relationships that have been established with other members ensure a continuing link with the house church and all it stands for.
- The peer group issue is a difficult one, and different house churches resolve it in different ways. Some house churches feel free to let their teens attend, in addition to house church, Christian peer groups which cater for common interests such as hiking, surfing, large worship and fun events, etc.

9.1.4.

Frazer (2001, p.194) has an interesting contribution on **the re-emerging inter-generational element in churches/small groups:**

- *Is it possible that we could see a cultural shift from life-stage community to intergenerational community at some point? The growing value of intergenerational life is being recognised by young adults in their twenties; driven by postmodern values, they seem to be crying out for it.* To quote one generation X couple (cited in 2001, p.195), "Our generation, without necessarily knowing it, is calling the church back to what the church has always been called to be – a multigenerational, multicultural, open, orthodox, and culturally engaged body of believers."
- *In effective places of genuine Christian community, such as in the small group, there are spiritual grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews – all of whom are intimately involved in the lives of the children.* "When asked about including children in the small group experience, the response of most group members sound like a stuck record: 'We tried it, and it didn't work.' 'It's too chaotic.' 'The adults don't enjoy it as much.' The role of children in the life of the community is dismissed as though it were as optional as electric windows in a

new vehicle. Well, it is *not* optional, and if we continue to ignore it, we will run the risk of seeing our children turn to other means of finding acceptance and fulfilment in their search to belong – thing like involvement with drugs or with gangs” (2001, p.97).

[Lest we forget: Lambert (1994, p.261) reminds us that in any case, in some parts of the world like China, ‘Sunday School’ work is impossible].

9.1.5.

Barna challenges us when he says that in the present-day church ‘revolution’ (2006, p.105) **we can expect *children/youth to be taken more seriously, parents to take responsibility*** and raise their family to be the Church of God instead of passing that responsibility to others in the hopes that someone will do something that bears some fruit (e.g. the Sunday School or Youth Programme in the traditional church – personal comment). This ‘revolution’ will furthermore (2006, p.108) “restore dignity to the family as the cornerstone of a free, democratic and healthy society.”

10.

THE HOUSE CHURCH AND SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE...

10.1.

Facilitation of spiritual discipline in the small group.

According to Snyder (1996, pp.130ff), the neglected area of spiritual discipline in the church, the handling of confrontation & reconciliation, the application of Hebrews 10:25, etc., are often facilitated by small groups. ‘Discipline’ means ‘discipleship,’ i.e. building a community of people who are truly Jesus’ disciples. This is a covenant people – “in fidelity to God as revealed in Scripture and in Jesus Christ, Christians accept responsibility for each other and agree to exercise discipline as needed in order to keep faith with God’s covenant” (1996, p.130) (Phil. 2:4, Heb. 3:13, Heb. 10:25, Jam. 5:16,

etc). These passages picture a level of Christian commitment and behaviour that requires some form of small covenant-cell to sustain. These qualities are simply lost to the church when it does not meet with sufficient frequency, intimacy and commitment to permit them to develop. “The New Testament shows a level of Christian life that is distinct from the world and that simply fails to happen *without some form of small group structure*” [my italics] (1996, p.131).

Grudem (1994, p.894) outlines the *purpose* of church discipline as follows: (a) The restoration and reconciliation of the believer going astray. (b) To keep the sin from spreading to others. (c) To protect the purity of the church and the honour of Christ.

When it comes to the *how* of church discipline, Grudem (1994, pp.897-898) is at pains to point out that the knowledge of the sin committed should be kept to the smallest group possible in the church: (a) This seems to be the purpose of Matthew 18:15-17 and its call for gradual progression from a private meeting, to a meeting with two or three others, to telling the entire church – in this way less harm is done to the reputation of the person, the church, and Christ. (b) Grudem gives several examples of ‘small group admonition,’ e.g. 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:13, 2:15, 3:10; James 5:19-20.

The writer’s point here is that the house church is probably ideally suited to the above biblical principle, as compared to a larger conventional church.

10.2.

Must the *whole church* be active in spiritual discipline?

Edwards (n.d., pp.85ff) points out with regard to the church in Corinth that discipline was not placed in the hands of the elders or the deacons only but in the hands of the whole church. Closing down the open house church meetings was never an option, even when some people reportedly became drunk at the Lord’s Supper. Paul did ask a *non*-local itinerant worker to visit Corinth viz. Timothy, and to review with them the things Paul had taught them in the past. Paul was besides himself with anxiety – finally Titus arrived with the news that the Corinthians had worked through the issues, to Paul’s relief. The whole

church had been active in the matter of discipline in the Corinthian house church network. This undergirds the role of the house church ('the whole church') in facilitating spiritual discipline.

11.

THE MOST COMMON *OBJECTIONS* TO THE HOUSE CHURCH TODAY (ARE THEY SURMOUNTABLE?)

11.1.

According to Birkey (1988, p.82), house churches will always struggle with certain issues/perceptions...

- There are limits to the kinds and quantities of programs manageable. (unfortunately Birkey does not elaborate)
- Financial abilities for pastoral support will vary from place to place (one may query whether this is always a bad thing – it is amazing how house churches have thrived under such circumstances, as we see e.g. in the Chinese house church movement)
- Christian education will top the list in sparking apprehension in parents. (see the strengths of house church ministry to children: point 7)
- Tendencies toward satisfaction with smallness and disinterest in growth may become a problem. (evident in small traditional churches also)
- Capable leadership may be lacking. (depends on how we define 'capable' and 'leadership')
- Exclusiveness may deter outreach. (can be true of traditional churches also)

Four potential disadvantages to houses churches, according to Hadaway and Wright and DuBose (1987, pp.241ff):

- a) *Instability* (1987, p.241). For those relatively uncommitted to the house church as an organizational form, the pull toward a traditional church with property and a building is strong.^{205 206}
- b) *Theological drift* (1987, p.242). There is sometimes a tendency toward ‘heresy.’ The authors admit that this is not unique to house churches but may be common to any independent group which rejects dominant cultural patterns. For example, a charismatic leader may be followed with unquestioning loyalty by the membership. House church groups which begin with leaders soundly trained in biblical theology and which do not put too much authority in the hands of their leaders and which are part of a larger denomination/collection of house churches are unlikely to suffer from theological drift.
- c) *Abuse of authority* (1987, p.242). Such abuse by house leaders is a problem which causes many to fear house church ministries. Leaders may become ‘little caesars’ or succumb to the ‘shepherding concept’ where they exercise too much control over members to the extent of personal manipulation. We are reminded by the authors that the latter is not inherently connected with the house church movement.
- d) *The control of meetings* (1987, p.243). For example, where to meet, abuse of time restraints, what to do with the children, etc.

To conclude, the authors (1987, p.243) say “many (objections) are *based on inaccurate perceptions of the house church and the tendency to view all groups as similar in structure and ideology. The problems which do exist can and have been overcome by many house churches around the world.*”²⁰⁷

²⁰⁵ A recent conversation (22/03/2009) with a pastor planting a church in Motherwell, PE, illustrated how ‘township Christians’ want to know that a church has a ‘proper building’ so that they may be buried from it with some status.

²⁰⁶ The authors (1987, pp.241-242) then give a case-history of how Houston Covenant Church resorted to the purchasing of homes for the leaders with large areas for meetings, so as to preserve their essential house church structure.

²⁰⁷ Ibid (1987, p.232). Those who argue that cell groups and house churches are a cultural form more suited to the Far East in comparison with the USA and Western nations, need to note that the massive

11.2.

Perceived disadvantages of house churches in pioneering situations...

D. Jones, veteran missionary in S. America, noted the following perceived and practical disadvantages of the house church in pioneering situations (1989, p.30): lack of space and disturbance of neighbours in close proximity. He quotes McGavran (cited in 1989, p.30) as saying that house churches can sometimes become 'wearisome' and that at times only those who know the householder will go to his house. Unfortunately these comments are not fully explained.

11.3.

'Disadvantages' house churches in general face today...

A. Jones (2007, pp.4-7), writing from a New Zealand house church perspective, names the following 'disadvantages' house churches in general face at this time:

- Authentication is delayed: house churches are not yet recognized by the mainstream of churches. One postmodern pastor said, 'They are not real churches.' To which the author adds, "He was basing his judgment on the old way of valuation, the 'Cold War' mindset Thomas Friedman called it, where people value things by 'weight, size and longevity'... The house church movement is basically overlooked and downgraded."
- Orientation is (sometimes) backwards: it should change from 'our' house to 'their' house, at least according to teaching of Jesus in Luke 10.
- Support is minimal: house churches are the 'cookie dough' of the new ecclesiology. We might be five years away from seeing a complete ecosystem of organic ministries that work together to enable a healthy, reproducing movement of house churches... The five-fold ministry teams needed for a healthy system are not yet in place. City-wide gatherings

growth of a single church is not imperative to the success or effectiveness of the cell group/house church movement. Growth can be diffused through many churches and have an equally impressive impact.

are still in the idea phase... Churches train their youth to 'find' a church when they leave college rather than 'start' a church since the existing structure is too complex for students to replicate.

- Integration is absent: house church utopia is still painted as being pure and contaminant free - as if you leave one model of church and adopt another with no reference to what you came out of. The truth is that there is compromise... 'Why can't the house church leaders be players in the wider picture of what God is doing among the old AND new wineskins? And why can't the residual church leaders give them some cards to play with?'

11.4.

Commonly-asked questions (and answers) about house churches today...

R and J Banks (1996, pp.249ff) field 'some of the most commonly asked questions about house churches,' and then respond (I believe, more than adequately):

- a) Question: Do people in house churches have a tendency to be inward-looking and cliquish? Answer: This tendency is a danger even to large churches. As J.O. Sanders observed (cited in 1996, p.249), it is people in the larger institutional churches who are most likely to have this problem, for it is very easy to become so involved in church activities that there is no time to be involved with other people. Attitude, not size, is the determining factor. Members of house churches do tend to devote time to one another, which results in a growing self-confidence and maturity that frees them to give more of themselves to others.
- b) Question: Do house churches breed an atmosphere in which all the members are expected to share their inner selves? Not everyone can cope with this. Answer: House churches operate differently to encounter or therapy groups. People are accepted as they are, whether or not they wish to share their inner selves with others. Some open up readily, others over a period of time as they begin to feel secure in themselves and in the group.

- c) Question: Do house churches only attract suburban middle-class people who like to gather in discussion groups? Answer: In the West the majority of house churches, like the majority of the population, are suburban and middle-class. In the third world basic Christian communities occur mainly among the poorer groups in the population. In any case, house churches occur among a wide array of social groupings: poor groups, ethnic groups, blue collar workers, and countercultural groups. Many groups include members who vary vastly from one another educationally, occupationally and culturally. Where a house church has a mixed group, there comes a growing understanding and appreciation of one another.²⁰⁸
- d) Question: How do you help a house church to be a place where people engage in serious learning and not a place where they share their ignorance and prejudices? Answer: If operating properly, a house church is well-suited to in-depth learning and protected against the above dangers.
- A house church structure encourages the participation of all present. Anyone who feels others are simply airing their prejudices is free to say so. The assumption that ordinary Christians are ignorant and prejudiced is usually held by people who believe that truth can only be communicated and safeguarded by formal preaching and teaching. House churches have a powerful new way of learning if they come together earnestly seeking the mind of Christ.
 - Because what takes place in the house church is regarded as fundamental to members' lives, as crucial to living out the gospel week by week, group members will not be satisfied with airing ignorance and prejudices. People generally come to house churches because they are hungry – for a deeper understanding of God and an authentic Christian life.
 - It is clear from the NT that the Holy Spirit reveals the truth about God primarily in and through a community. The Spirit gives a certain amount of

²⁰⁸ In our house churches in Port Elizabeth the rich and utterly poor mix, so also the educated and uneducated, people of different cultures, etc – there is an acceptance and love such I have hardly seen in other churches/groups.

understanding to each person – when these things are shared, evaluated and checked, a full-orbed understanding of God and life begins to appear.

- e) Question: Are house churches likely to head off on a tangent, especially if there is a dominant person in the group? Answer: This danger is there for small groups and large congregations, even if the dominant person is theologically trained. For example, many pastors pontificate on subjects far outside of their field, and many small group leaders may do the same. In a house church, however, anyone in the group can at least question the attempt by one person to impose his/her understanding of God on everyone else. This ability to question is both necessary and a safeguard. It is precisely because a house church is not led or dominated by any one person, and because there are mutual checks and balances through the diverse people making up the group, that the house church opens up the possibility of a rich, multilayered understanding of God and the Christian life.
- f) Question: Do you find that a house church is too small to have an adequate breadth of gifts and resources to draw on and that the few who have outstanding gifts don't have enough scope to practice them? Answer: It is good to remember that some things are more easily learned when a group is small rather than when it is large.
- Members can come to understand and appreciate one another more and to recognize each other's weaknesses and strengths.
 - They can clarify what they are looking for in a church and what the Bible has to say about it.
 - They can help each other re-order and consolidate their priorities and responsibilities better.

- Furthermore, a house church, as there is need, may draw on others from the wider congregation of God's people or a house church cluster to complement and supplement what they have.²⁰⁹
- g) Question: Since they lack a single appointed leader, how do house churches deal with people who require discipline? Are people likely to get away with things that should be openly challenged? Answer: Again, this is not a problem specific to house churches. In fact, how often does discipline in the NT sense take place in a local congregation that does have an appointed leader or leaders? All kinds of disobedience (jealousy, unethical behaviour in the workplace, family abuse, etc) go unchallenged. Even in house churches there is a tendency to tread lightly in regard to people's lives and to avoid questioning their lifestyle choices. However, it is precisely in a house church setting, as people begin to feel secure about opening up to one another and committing themselves to a distinctive Christian lifestyle, that discipline becomes a real possibility. There is a subliminal discipline, often in a profound way, much as the ethos of a family helps shape the character of its members and acts as a natural constraint on their selfish tendencies. If necessary, when there is evidence of someone's acting in a way that is seriously detrimental to individuals or to the group as a whole, a basis has been established so that the person can be lovingly called to account and encouraged to change. Sometimes a group has to confront one of its members – this is always difficult but the outcome is generally positive.
- h) Question: Do house churches encourage people to focus on spiritual and relational concerns at the expense of effective outreach and mission? Answer: Consider the healthy family. It spends time together, eats and drinks together, shares stories about happenings during the week, holds council to decide important issues or projects. Precisely because they deal with 'in-house' matters in an intentional way, such families create people who have the inner resources and energy to give themselves to others. Parents model this behaviour, and

²⁰⁹ This happens all the time in the house church network the writer is involved in. We are able to draw on the expertise, knowledge and spiritual gifts of others in the network, particularly in terms of the five-fold ministry mentioned before (Eph. 4).

children eventually imitate their behaviour. It is the same in a well-functioning house church. Thus it opens up hospitality to strangers who are lonely or in crisis, and offers them a place to belong. As in the early church (see 1 Cor. 14:23-25), this provides a setting in which some people come to faith in Christ. Furthermore, many people come to house churches precisely because they want to reflect Christ in all their activities and relationships in a way that is natural to themselves and relevant to others. In other words, they desire to give the whole of their lives in an outgoing and missionary dimension.²¹⁰

- i) Question: Is there an inherent instability about house churches? Do most of them fold after a while? Answer: The fact is that most of them do not fold. A few disband for understandable reasons, such as members moving.²¹¹ Other groups end because they were built on an inadequate foundation, for example, as an add-on in a congregation's program – members are too busy to give them the priority they deserve. Or the group may be too homogeneous, lacking older and maturer Christians to give it stability. Generally, house churches tend to have a long life. They may look more fragile than highly-structured organizations, but because of the strong *relationships* that develop within them, they can be surprisingly resilient.

²¹⁰ Every house church the writer is acquainted with has some way of outreach, formal/informal – e.g. ministry to the poor, the sick, the abandoned, the spiritually lost, etc. Having pastored five congregations, the writer can say with some authority that it is easier to 'hide' (even for a lifetime) in a traditional congregation than in a house church which intentionally focuses on maturing believers and touching a broken world.

²¹¹ Before we become too judgmental of house churches on this point, consider how many conventional churches 'fold' all over the world on a daily basis (the statistics in the Western world are startling) – witness church buildings all over the world being used for business, bingo-halls, etc. I could show you quite a few in my home city.

12.

LEARNING FROM 'INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES' – PAST AND PRESENT.

(lessons for traditional churches and house churches) ²¹²

Moltmann (1978, pp.122ff) points out that, **concurrent with the 'Constantinian era' of the church**, there developed an immense **blossoming of Christian communal orders** [my emphasis]. He (1978, pp.122-123) continues,

“Here in these close, inclusive circles *the community whose existence was no longer possible in the large churches was experienced in radical discipleship* [my emphasis], in freedom from property, and in contemplation and work. Without the cloister communities and the lay brotherhoods and sisterhoods, the great churches probably would have been transformed without resistance into a political religion... *For the Reformers this duality of the Christian life was intolerable* [my emphasis]... In place of the two-fold life-form of Christianity in cloister and world the Reformers wanted to realize the principle of one congregation in the midst of the world. Monasticism and cloister life therefore vanished from the Protestant churches. Unfortunately, the Reformers who denied monasticism did not formulate a comparably clear denial of the state church. Quite to the contrary, from 1525 on Luther and Melanchthon hindered the building of independent community by supporting the Protestant congregations which fell under the supervision of the electorates. Only in the confessionally mixed areas, as for example in Niederrhein, were the Protestant 'congregations under the cross' able to realize the hope of the Reformation hope in the congregation.”

Moltmann (1978, pp.122-123) adds,

“Today (1978) we stand in a situation of *transition* [my emphasis] – certainly not a dramatic, spectacular change but a slow and persisting transformation. From a statistical perspective, the quantity of the Christian life is decreasing, but in spite of that, the quality of Christian life is rising in many congregations. The number of people who attend Sunday morning worship

²¹² Community (*koinonia*) being a strong aspect of house church life in general.

services is decreasing, while *the number of participants in voluntary groups of spiritual, diakonic, liturgical, and political tasks is increasing* [my emphasis]. To the degree that the church which takes care of people ‘from above’ is becoming ineffective, there is emerging at the basis a process of becoming independent. Along with this process, *the congregation from below is appearing*” [my emphasis] [Prophetic words indeed!].

‘Community lessons’ from Bonhoeffer’s Finkenwalde community in Germany, and the contemporary Taize community in France – according to Rakoczy, 2007, pp.43-62. ²¹³

Finkenwalde and Taize are *linked by a vision of community as central to the Christian life* (2007, p.43). Much of what Bonhoeffer envisioned is lived at Taize. Bonhoeffer “believed in community as urgently as he believed in the Word” (2007, p.44). God reveals Himself as a person, in the Church. The Christian communion is God’s final revelation... He describes the structure of Christian community as “a community of persons who are and act for others rather than themselves.

- a) In calling for a ‘new kind of monasticism,’ Bonhoeffer was *not suggesting isolation from the world*, in fact he felt strongly that the seminarians of the Confessing Church should have an experience of community life in which to grow in their Christian commitment as they prepared for pastoral ministry in the dangerous years of the Third Reich (2007, p.45).
- b) Life at Finkenwalde combined *structure and flexibility*. The academic had to combine with spiritual formation. One student recalled Bonhoeffer’s studies on *the Acts of the Apostles and how he ‘drew out the early Church’s exploratory*

²¹³ 2006 was the 100th anniversary of the birth of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (hanged by the Nazis in 1945 at the age of 39), member of the Confessing Church and outstanding theologian. His *Life Together* reflects his experience of life in the underground seminary at Finkenwalde. In 2005, Brother Roger Schutz, founder (1940) and Prior of the Taize community, was stabbed to death at the age of 90 by a Romanian woman who was mentally disturbed – Taize has continued as a community and grown to a never-expected and significant outreach to the young people of the world.

efforts to take a visible, active shape in the world – an im-pressive comparison to the situation of the Confessing Church [my emphasis] (2007, p.47).²¹⁴

- c) Note Brother Roger's short *description of community life*, based on the following principle (2007, p.54):

Throughout your day let work and rest

Be quickened by the Word of God.

Keep inner silence in all things

And you will dwell in Christ.

Be filled with the spirit of the Beatitudes:

joy, simplicity, mercy.

Based on this simple statement in the 1940's, Brother Roger wrote *The Rule of Taize* in the winter of 1952-1953. This describes "a way of life based on the Gospels; it does not prescribe the details of community life but inspires with its vision of life lived together in Christ. *The description of the early Christian community in Acts 2:42-47; 4:32 is mirrored in the life of Taize [my emphasis]:* 'concentrated attention to the teaching of the Apostles, in meditation, study and proclamation; communion in fraternal openness and mutual interchange and confession of sins...; and the breaking of the Bread in common prayer.'" (2007, p.56).

- d) The *prophetic and practical side*. "The Rule gives a few guidelines for brothers on mission, anticipating the time when small groups would live amongst the poor in many parts of the world.²¹⁵ The brothers are to be 'witnesses for Christ (and) a sign of His presence among all men (sic) and bearers of joy'" (2007, pp.56-57). Rakoczy (2007, p.60) reports that "Taize continues to be a living, thriving community. Its outreach to the young people of the world, the witness of small

²¹⁴ Rakoczy cites Kuhns (in 2007, p.47), "Bonhoeffer's short treatise on Christian community is a *distillation of the vision of early community- life as described in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-34) and an elaboration of what had been learned in the Finkenwalde seminary*" [my emphasis].

²¹⁵ Recently the writer met a Swiss Christian couple, he an engineer and she a business-woman, who moved from Switzerland to Calitzdorp in the Klein Karoo with the specific goal of uplifting the poor of the community through skills-development and job-creation – how enriching!

communities of brothers in many poor cities, and the vibrancy of its vision of trust and reconciliation are fresh and attractive to each new generation.”

- e) What about the *implications* of Bonhoeffer and Taize *for South Africa today*, asks Rakoczy? (2007, pp.60-62). Post-Apartheid SA has struggled to find ‘forms of community across the divides of race, class and culture...

” The question is, how can the concept of *ubuntu* with its strong community and communal responsibility and Bonhoeffer’s and Taize’s influence mutually enrich and energize each other in concrete ways in South Africa? Once again we see the failure of models when young people want to import the Taize experience back home as if it were possible to re-create that unique community in another context. However, Taize offers the challenge of using *prayer and action* to discern the signs of the times in each particular context and then to act together to make the sense of the direction concrete – in forms of faith-sharing, community life, social commitment and ecumenical action. Bonhoeffer’s vision of “new forms of community life as essential for formation for ministry have taken root in various churches who now have houses of studies/formation communities for their ministerial candidates” (2007, p.61).

Community and discipleship lessons from intentional communities for the church/house church.

Snyder (2004, p.215) indicates that in many churches *koinonia* and genuine discipleship are still either unperceived in their biblical dimensions or else an unattained vision we merely long for. We yearn to be open, honest, helpful and caring with our brothers and sisters, and to have them be so with us, as well as to practise mutual discipling – but the means to that end either elude us or appear too costly. We must therefore learn from our Christian brothers and sisters of various communions around the world who are now living and experiencing the deep sharing reality of the church (2004, p.215). In many case we find their practice at least as pure and as biblical as our doctrine.

From these we can learn more fully (2004, pp.215-21):

- The meaning of discipleship
- How to minister to and incorporate the resources of the elderly and institutionalized
- The place of the creative arts – in writing, global mission, in creation-care and theological reflection
- The cost of discipleship (Phil. 2:5-8; 1 Pet. 2:21) (real Christian life is self-affirming, not self-mutilating)
- Concern for the poor
- True church growth/'kingdom faithfulness.' This "is a matter of removing barriers to life and growth. Once these barriers (not personal sin but also *human traditions, worn-out structures and fundamental misconceptions about the nature of the church*) are removed, *the church will grow through the dynamic of God within it* [my emphasis]... When Lazarus was raised from the dead from the dead, he was 'wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.' Jesus said, 'Take off the grave clothes and let him go' (Jn.11:44). This is a lesson for the church today" (2004, p.220).

With regard to learning from these special communities, where do we start?

Simson (2003, p.21) has some wise words,

"Imagine a church out there, out where the questions are, the teens, the people in the clubs, concert halls, galleries, in the media, in politics, among the 300 million Dalits of India looking for identity, among the 27 million slaves we have today on the globe, in education, arts, sports, interpreting the prophetic dreams and healthy questions that today's society discusses. And when we finish imagining, let's do it. Millions of people have Jesus-shaped questions – and Church-as-God-wants it, the church that he invented, is the vessel to harvest those people. However, most folks only

*know Church-as-we-know-it and are perplexed, because they see the difference between Jesus and the classical church system very well, and wonder where to go. So they go back to their concerts, music, arts and media. So why don't you also, like a growing number of Christians who begin to see the connection, **open your house** [my emphasis], open up your kitchen, open your fridge, invite folks with questions, forget all churchyness, and let the answers begin to sink in" [my emphasis].*

CHAPTER VI: HOUSE CHURCH CONCLUSIONS, CHALLENGES AND ENCOURAGEMENTS

1. MAJOR ADVANTAGES OF THE HOUSE CHURCH TODAY
2. THE 'HOW TO' OF HOUSE CHURCH: PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF HOUSE CHURCH MEETINGS AND NETWORK STRUCTURES
3. YOUTH AND THE POOR AT THE FOREFRONT
4. HANDLING OPPOSITION 'FROM WITHIN'
5. OPENNESS TO RENEWAL
6. THE TIMES ARE URGENT
7. REALISM AND HOPE

1.

MAJOR ADVANTAGES OF THE HOUSE CHURCH TODAY... ²¹⁶

1. 1.

From the perspective of Hadaway and Wright and Dubose (1987, pp.239-241):

- From a church-planting perspective, its *relatively low cost*. Since house churches utilise homes, there is no need to buy property, build a building, pay mortgages, pay massive heating/cooling/maintenance costs. This frees funds for pastoral work, missions and ministry [note the high costs of property today, especially in cities].
- The *efficient use and development of leaders*. The small ratio of leader to members makes true pastoring possible. It is not easy to see to each member in a larger traditional church. 'Laypersons' are used very effectively to help lead a house church - overdependence on paid, ordained clergy is not found in house churches.

²¹⁶ Please note that the writer has selected here those writers on house church that have [in his opinion] the most theological substance. There are many books on the market with a 'popular' and pragmatic approach to the subject, but not as many [at this stage] from a robustly theological point of view.

- The *quality of group life*. This includes informal fellowship and relationships that exist among members. The smallness of the group and the home-setting is conducive to the formation of close, face-to-face relationships between members. These are encouraged through the sharing of personal needs, mutual prayer and support. In this environment people feel known, loved, and tend to exhibit high levels of personal commitment to the group.
- The *inclusive nature of house churches*. Because everyone knows each other and a high level of commitment exists, there is little possibility that a member could reduce participation or leave the fellowship without intensive efforts being made to bring the individual back to full participation. People don't 'fall through the cracks' as they often tend to do in larger churches. House churches also have a higher capacity to accept 'misfits' or persons with minor emotional problems. Rather than being homogeneous fellowships of young urban couples, for example, house churches often are heterogeneous mixtures – hence anyone who attends is likely to feel accepted and loved.
- House churches have *great growth potential*. With such little structure, small monetary investment and size limitations, it is natural for house church groups to multiply when they grow too large. This is not a split but a planned multiplication.

As an *example* the authors (1987, pp.250-251) give the matter of house churches in high-rise cities around the world. Such city centres are often highly un-churched, with sometimes one or two small congregations serving 30,000 or more residents. All too often these churches are complacent, older congregations with large endowments and with members who feel little need or desire to reach the many high-rise residents in the community. A viable alternative is starting house churches in one of the high-rise developments. The church-planter's home might serve as the facility for the new congregation. Once a core group has been established, the church-planter may begin to train up leadership to 'go and do likewise.' In order to avoid frustration over the inability to afford property (and for ecclesiological reasons), it is essential that members become committed to remaining a house church, as has happened (for example) in the case of

the Baptist work in Singapore. The ultimate goal of the high-rise church is to form an interlocking network of house churches in downtown apartments. Many people could be reached through this strategy who would never attend one of the down-town cathedral-like structures.²¹⁷

1.2.

Major advantages of house churches – from the perspective of Gibbs (cited in D. Jones, 1989, p.30):

- A learning (sharing) situation because of the informality.
- The development of meaningful relationships.
- Greater pastoral care and concern for the neighbourhood.
- Lay leadership and spiritual gifts identified more easily than in traditional churches.

1.3.

From the perspective of Birkey (1988, pp.82ff):

- a) The informal setting and communal atmosphere provide *the creative use of space and time*. Not only enormous financial overheads are saved but the availability of time is not cramped as in the case of the typical Sunday morning church schedule. The intended focus can be more personally intense and fruitful. The style of communication is enhanced by face-to-face contact and a freedom of interaction, raising the potential for learning, healing and growth.
- b) The *house church's self-image*. It can easily sense being the *body of Christ* – a complete church gathering of priests with gifts for the edification of the whole. Leaders encourage the development of those with leadership gifts.
- c) The house church can *practise consensus in decision-making*, an advance over traditional organizational procedures and voting manoeuvres. Flexibility replaces rigid traditions. Thus members also 'own' their responsibilities due to the

²¹⁷ During a visit to down-town Hong Kong some years ago, the writer was able to witness firsthand the effectiveness of cell churches in that community. What would go for cells, would go for fully-fledged house churches as well.

heightened sense of belonging. Because of intimacy, openness to different perspectives is more likely. The house church seldom fractures the family according to age or sex – rather it functions as an extended family.

- d) The house church *fosters a quality of commitment without hiding places*. Participants will usually become involved on a significant level or drop out. Hans-Ruedi Weber (cited in 1988, p.83) stated, “the house church cannot escape dealing with the ordinary concerns and anxieties of men and women... it is here that the real obedience of men in their daily lives will be worked out, very slowly.”

1.4.

Major advantages of house churches – from the perspective of Prior (1985, pp.83ff):

Prior (1985, pp.83ff), writing about ‘Love for Strangers,’ has a section on ‘**Homes as Bridgeheads.**’ He reminds the church that God has sent us to *penetrate the homes and meeting places of the community*, which is exactly what happened in the Acts of the Apostles, as the first Christians shared themselves in loving compassion with their neighbours (as examples he cites the ministries of Peter at Joppa and Caesarea, also the ministry of Paul in Cyprus, Philippi, Thessalonica, etc). Prior thus makes a special plea that our *evangelism* concentrate on Christian *homes*, and that Christian families should see *hospitality*, given and received, as the main method of expressing the love of God to those who are at present strangers and outsiders.

“The whole home-church will be concerned for such families and individuals. This will provide a vital cutting-edge to the life of the home-church, as well as making it possible for all its members to work together providing hospitality in this way” (1985, p.84).

1.5.

Major Advantages of house churches – from the perspective of R and J Banks (1998, pp.241ff):

- a) *Effectiveness in ‘an age of hunger’* (Sider, cited in 1998, pp.241ff): it is in the house church setting, probably alone, that “the church today will be able to

forge a faithful lifestyle for Christians in an Age of Hunger. In small house settings brothers and sisters can challenge each other's affluent lifestyles... discuss finances... share tips for simple living.”

Eller (cited in 1998, p.241), in his *Outward Bound*, wrote of an approach to church life where congregations see themselves less as commissaries than as caravans, which travel light, can change direction easily and are always moving forward.

- b) *Effectiveness in an age of fragmentation* (1998, p.241): a more communal approach to small church and congregational life can help counter tendencies in our society to greater fragmentation. The rediscovery of the extended family has brought people into touch with one another again. House churches also provide a support system for parents, children, marriages, those from broken homes, single-parent families, etc. An understanding of the church as a ‘clan’ of families [note the clan support system of our SA ethnic groups] can play a significant role in ameliorating the problems mentioned.²¹⁸
- c) *The integrating ministry of house churches* (1998, pp.204-205): house churches draw in people who are on the edges of traditional local churches but never fully integrated into them. They help such people connect more fully with Christ, with other believers, and with God's purposes in the world. Despite the fact that local churches may have many interest groups, certain people still tend to miss out. Often such groups even keep younger people segregated from the total community of the church. For example, a singles' group may provide acceptance to divorced people and support to the widowed, but it does not provide an opportunity for all to meet and mix in a substantial way. People who are physically, psychologically or developmentally challenged need to belong to a small group where they can minister to others in special ways that only they know. What about different race and ethnic groups? – it has often been said that ten o' clock on Sunday

²¹⁸ Scott Peck has pointed out (cited in R & J Banks, 1998, p.232) that communal groups offer a low-capital, high-touch, people-initiated approach, similar to Alcoholics Anonymous and fellowships modeled on it that have brought healing to millions of people through the USA and indeed the world.

morning is the most segregated hour in the week. People gather in different churches according to their colour or ethnic background... genuinely multicultural churches do not exist in large numbers (1998, pp.222-223).

- d) *The affirming role of house churches* (1998, pp.194-195): many coming to a house church for the first time come with a relatively low estimate of themselves and their gifts. Such low self-esteem may stem from many sources, e.g. constant criticism in their upbringing, even the kind of Christianity some were exposed to early on, such as a strong legalism with far more don'ts than do's, etc. It takes a while but soon the affirming ethos of a house church begins to have an effect. There is usually a strong emphasis on grace rather than performance for acceptance. People are encouraged to see themselves 'in Christ.' Focus is on each other's strengths rather than weaknesses.²¹⁹ C.S. Lewis (cited in 1998, p.195) wrote,

"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisation – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours. This does not mean that we are to be perpetually solemn. We must play. But our merriment must be of that kind (and it is, in fact, the merriest kind) which exists between people who have,

²¹⁹ In the writer's experience of house churches over the past three years, this affirming effect on people's sense of self-worth has been staggering to say the least. People begin to feel 'special,' as to their personality, gifts, etc. He has seen people come out of the mud as it were and blossom like a flower!

from the outset, taken each other seriously – no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption. And our charity must be a real and costly love, with deep feeling for the sins in spite of which we love the sinner – no mere tolerance, or indulgence which parodies love as flippancy parodies merriment.”

- e) *The special connection of house churches with 'life'* (1998, p.46): the context of the home has a 'down-to-earthness' and a world-related feel. The early Christians did not meet on consecrated or special premises (as did other first-century religious groups) – its context was the home of one of its members. 'What happens in church' must always connect to the stuff of everyday life.

1.6.

Major advantages of house churches – from the perspective of Simson (1998, pp.32ff):

1. *Discipled multiplication.* House church is a model centred on multiplication and discipleship with huge growth potential, because the 'cell' is the multipliable unit itself. Mentoring, multiplication and discipleship lie at the heart of the concept. The traditional congregation is not by definition a discipleship model and structurally tends to prevent mentoring and discipleship.
2. *Persecution-proof structure.* Through their small and flexible way of life and their persecution-proof spirit, house churches can develop into an almost persecution-proof structure. This is as opposed to the very visible and immovable traditional 'church with a cross on its steeple.'
3. *Freedom from church growth barriers.* Once careful attention is given to prevent house churches from moving from an organic to an organizational mode, house churches can be multiplied through mitosis, an organic cell-production process, and the overall growth of a movement is virtually free from growth barriers.
4. *Involvement of many more people more efficiently.* Congregations are often programme-based, where most programmes are organized at the congregational level. They have proved to be quite inefficient and resource-hungry, usually involving 20% of exhausted members doing the work for the other, more passive 80%. In the

house church almost everyone can be easily and naturally involved. These members tend to be more fulfilled and happy.

5. *Breaking the pastoral care dilemma.*
6. *Providing a place of life transformation and accountability.* The house church is an ideal setting to change values, transfer life and therefore transform lifestyles. The congregational model's failure here is shown up by analyses. Many Christians end up with the same lifestyle of people around them, become indistinguishable from society and lose their prophetic edge. House churches provide a place of transformation of values and re-ordering of life, offering mutual and organic accountability.
7. *The house is a most effective place for new Christians.* Often traditional congregations resent new people coming in, 'spoiling the order and the situation.'²²⁰ This accounts for the estimated 99% of drop-outs in so-called evangelistic follow-up programmes. The house church, by contrast, is an effective, natural welcoming zone for new people to come and more often than not stay in touch with the Christian community. It also reverses the 'getting people to church' to 'getting the church to people.'
8. *Solving the leadership crisis.* House churches are led by 'elders,' and they are just that: older than most, without necessarily being 'elderly.'²²¹ Elders do not have to be skilled chairpersons or learned teachers: they are usually modest and authentic fathers and mothers with healthy family-life. This leadership is more easily raised up than religious experts. These elders are matured by the constant input of apostolic, prophetic and pastoral ministries from the group itself or the network to which the house church belongs.

²²⁰ When some of the churches the writer was privileged to pastor began to grow with an influx of new people, this was at first welcomed by the members. But soon some would complain about not knowing everybody anymore, having to give up one's favourite seat, the congregation has become 'rowdy' instead of sitting in silence before Services, etc.

²²¹ The writer would say that not all house churches are led by elders, necessarily. Often they are led by people that carry that dignity, maturity and character who may definitely qualify as elders in terms of the Scriptures, but are not given this title simply because of the baggage so often attached to the term. The writer holds to this view, together with our network in the NMB Metro, as well as Floyd McClung, missionary and author on 'simple churches' and other subjects.

9. *Overcoming the clergy-laity division.* The house church does not need a pastor in the traditional sense, because elders, functioning together with the corporate giftedness of the house church, maintain and multiply the life of the church. This breaks the clergy-laity divide, which the congregational system reinforces.
10. *It is more biblical.* We cannot afford to ignore biblical revelation. With biting wit Simson maintains that “the Bible simply does not teach ‘that a holy crowd gathering on a holy day at a holy hour in a holy sanctuary to participate in a holy ritual performed by holy men in holy clothes for a holy fee is a New Testament church’” (1998, p.36). It is worth struggling even with our own trusted tradition for the purpose of regaining biblical truth.
11. *It is undeniably cheaper.* Congregations normally cost enormous sums of money to establish, and more money to maintain and to propagate. In an age when there seems to be an endless cry for more money for ‘the work of the church,’ we should not overlook the alternatives but be good stewards of the finances God has entrusted to us.
12. *It resurrects the city church.* Simson sees the *present* church organized into 4 levels:
 - a) The home (where organic fellowship is possible);
 - b) The congregational church (the traditional meeting-oriented, denominational church);
 - c) The city or region;
 - d) The denomination (the network, conference or organisation of denominational churches in that area).

While the traditional church is typically focused on two levels (b and d), the cell church would be focused on (a) and (b). The house church, however, allows us to regain a focus on (a) and (c).

“With a new wave of house churches, this also opens up the way back to the ‘city church,’ literally the church of the city – all Christians of a city or region together, meeting regularly or irregularly in city-wide celebrations, where the

city's most gifted Christians and humble servants forget titles and church and, in a new maturity, sacrifice their own name, denominationalism, reputation and single-handed success to the single advancement of only one King. *What is already happening at the small level of house churches will eventually spill over on a larger, city scale, where the church will 'excel at the small and therefore excel at the large'* (1998, p.38).

Apart from the foregoing advantages of house church over traditional church, Simson (1998, p.248) also mentions some *advantages in church growth on the basis of the principle that 'The smaller the church, the larger its growth potential'* [my emphasis]. In a worldwide research project (referred to before), Schwarz (cited in 1998, p.248) studied the average number of people added to a local church, over a typical five-year period:

Size of church attendance	People added in 5 years	Growth as % of whole church
1-100 (average 51)	32	63
100-200	32	23
200-300	39	17
300-400	25	7
1000+ (average 2856)	112	4

Simson (1998, p.249) points out that what Schwarz does not show us, is what happens if you compare the growth potential of the organic house church with the organized and traditional 'small church' according to the congregational pattern – it would be like comparing mustard-seed growth with building a pile of rocks. The growing congregational model usually grows by *addition*, whereas house churches grow by *multiplication*. Although we have no global empirical figures for comparison, the signs are very clear that the growth of potential continues to increase as the church size continues to go down, and it seems to reach a maximum potential at the size of 10-15 people per church.

1.7.

Major advantages of house churches – from the perspective of Yun (2003, pp.6ff):

He (2003, pp.6ff) mentions how the great missionary pioneer to China, James Hudson-Taylor, came to realise that missionaries to China remained indefinitely in leadership and decision-making positions within the body of Christ, thus stunting the growth of the indigenous church. The church in China grew only very slowly during the missionary era, not at the pace or in the form necessary for the world's largest nation to experience Christ's salvation in the way God desired. The 'missionary church' with all its Western trappings had erected physical, spiritual and cultural walls between the Chinese Christians and the unconverted millions surrounding them (2003, p.8).

Yun (2003, pp.14ff) then quotes Adeney's list of the *strengths of the Chinese house churches*:

- They are *indigenous*. They have cast off the trappings of the West and have developed their own forms of ministry. The dynamics flow from their freedom from institutional and traditional bondage.
- They are *rooted in family units*. They have become part of the Chinese social structure. The believing community is built up of little clusters of Christian families.
- They are *stripped of non-essentials*. They are flexible and have succeeded without large, costly evangelistic campaigns, etc.
- They *emphasize the lordship of Christ*. Loyalty to Jesus as Head of the church supersedes all other loyalties – the body is not controlled by outside organizations and resists extraneous, unscriptural practices.
- They have *confidence in the sovereignty of God*. They have seen God overrule history and hopelessness.
- They *love the Word of God*. They appreciate the value of the Scriptures, have sacrificed in order to get copies of the Bible, their knowledge of God has deepened as they have copies and memorized the Word of God.

- They are *praying churches*. With no human support and surrounded by their persecutors, believers have been cast on God and the confidence that He answers prayer.
- They are *caring and sharing churches*. They care for their own people as well as their neighbours. Their love creates a tremendous force for spontaneous evangelism.
- They *depend on lay leadership*. The imprisonment of so many pastors forced them to do so, with the advantage that the house churches are often led and encouraged by people from various walks of life with gifts of teaching and edification.
- They have been *purified by suffering*. The believers have learnt firsthand that suffering is part of God's purpose in building His church. Nominal Christianity could never have survived the tests of the Cultural Revolution.
- They are *zealous in evangelism*. People have come to faith not so much through public preaching (in most cases banned) as by the believers' personal lifestyle, humble service and courage in testimony.

1.8.

The writer **concludes, on the basis of the evidence outlined above as well as in all the fore-going sections of this dissertation, THAT THE ADVANTAGES OF HOUSE CHURCHES FAR OUTWEIGHT THOSE OF THE TRADITIONAL CONGREGATION.**

2.

THE 'HOW TO' OF HOUSE CHURCHES...

2.1.

Follow basic, trinitarian principles in establishing house churches.

R and J Banks (1998, pp.120ff) outline three important principles, *rooted in the Trinitarian nature of God*:

- The Providential Principle: Build on What the Father Is Already Doing* (1998, pp.121-122). In forming house churches we must take into account those networks of personal relationships that God has already established between

people. It does not matter whether they are based on geographical proximity, mutual interests, or spiritual affinity. What matters is that we recognise and use them. Do not attempt to create groups in an artificial, top-down manner, flinging together people who hardly know one another. There is a corollary to this – God also works providentially in the lives of individuals, preparing them circumstantially to make particular kinds of contributions in a house church, e.g. in the matter of spiritual gifts required for a healthy house church. Too often there is too much reliance on other factors, such as theological education, leadership skills, charismatic credentials, etc – while gifted, such people may not have the *relational skills and accumulated wisdom necessary to function in an effective and community-building way.*

B. *The Resurrection Principle: Follow Christ by Dying to Self* (1998, pp.122-123).

As with Christ, in the church it is only through death that new life comes; renewal only takes place if we are willing to allow some of our attitudes and structures to undergo some radical changes. Unless we are willing to question many of our previous views and procedures and allow them to die when they get in the way of spiritual growth in the group, a new house church will soon suffocate. We must continually test our beliefs and practices by the Bible and our common dependence on the Holy Spirit.

C. *The Organic Principle: Discern the Spirit's Leading and Dynamics* (1998, p.123).

It is only as house churches grow from the seeds and the watering of the Spirit that they will prosper and fulfil their proper role. All too often the development of house churches is based on managerial thinking and the application of techniques. While a certain amount of organizing is involved in establishing house churches, and certain ways of doing things are more productive than others, there must be more dependence on the Spirit than on leadership manuals, group dynamics (not that these have nothing to offer) derived largely from secular organizations, etc. Home churching, like raising a family or developing a friendship, is an organic rather than a contrived affair. House churches must have room to grow at their own pace, in their own way, and

basically out of their own resources.²²² They need to be free to sense the mind of the Spirit on these issues, rather than allowing an individual in some or other hierarchy to make decisions and impose procedures.

2.2.

Some *practical* steps in the establishment of house churches.

2.2.1.

R and J Banks (1998, pp.108ff) suggest the following:

- a) *A Solid Foundation* (1998, pp.109-110). This must be laid through conferring with interested people to confirm God's leading, the commitment of a number of members to the venture long-term, establishing a clear goal viz. to develop a communal Christian *life*, much discussion and prayer, etc.
- b) *A Basic Commitment* (1998, pp.110ff). Not all current and future members of the group must have this depth of commitment; the house church is able to include, even invite, others who may come to it initially to fulfil a certain interest or meet a particular need. But there does have to be a core group that maintains a commitment to developing a common life. It is often helpful to express this commitment tangibly, e.g. a written statement or type of covenant – the authors then give some outstanding examples of such statements/covenants undertaken by certain groups in the USA (1998, p.111).
- c) *A Framework of Belief* (1998, pp.112-113). There needs to be an agreement that the group will operate within certain basic, yet not too restrictive or detailed, Christian convictions – consider C.S. Lewis's 'mere Christianity.' Such convictions may include: the personhood and creativity of God; the divinity and saving work of Christ; the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit; the communal and missionary nature of the church; the certainty of future judgment and transformation. Of course, the Bible provides the foundation and norm for such convictions.

²²² In the writer's cell church experience, in hindsight, not sufficient weight was given to these things in developing cell life.

d) *A Pastoral Centre* (1998, pp.114). This may develop among the core group members or perhaps from others who join the group – these are people who show evidence of exerting a presence that enables the group to reach its full potential. We are not talking about ‘leaders’ or ‘elders’ as those words are normally understood; what is in mind is the Bible’s meaning of these terms. Some groups regard these servant-leaders as elders, which in biblical usage referred mostly to older, wiser, life-experienced people. Others call them ‘visionaries.’ (unfortunately ‘leader’ today often gives permission to everyone to settle back and become followers – likewise ‘elder’ is seen more in terms of position than character). Note, all this is *very different from a pastor in a congregation or a church planter appointing one person (usually a man) to be the house church leader from the beginning.*²²³

R and J Banks (1998, pp.117ff) list a few more wise and *extremely practical* considerations in the establishment of house churches :

- a) *Do not rush into ‘religious’ activities* (1998, pp.117ff). Families can get to know one another first through each family or individual relating their ‘story.’ Casual ‘hanging out together’ is most helpful. Make meals central to gatherings – this is a powerful means for people getting to know each other and opening up to each other. Open up room for freedom and flexibility, give recreation a regular place in the group’s ministry. Scott Peck (cited in 1998, p.119) wrote, “I’m not sure there can be a community that is truly successful when its members do not laugh and celebrate with frequent gusto.”
- b) *What about financing?* (1998, p.140).The authors mention one of their earlier groups which provided a partial income for the person who had set up the group and continued the teaching sessions. But, they neither desired nor needed a full-

²²³ In the writer’s case, the ‘leaders’ are called/seen as ‘facilitators.’ From the outset the writer insisted that he not be called “Pastor” – this inevitably leads to the expectation that he is there to ‘pastor’ the flock in the traditional sense. We insist that we are all called to shepherd one another in terms of encouragement, exhortation, prayer, work and witness.

time pastor, so the teacher was encouraged to develop a ministry outside of the group in any direction he chose.

c) *Be pro-active about potential problems in the house church such as:*

- Disagreements over doctrine and ethics (1998, pp.185-193). Members who hold strong convictions about a particular issue have the freedom to ventilate them but not to indoctrinate others. If the issues are 'personal hobby horses,' people are encouraged to leave them at the door and not insist that they dominate regular discussion in the group. True community only develops when we learn to face the reality of our differences and work through them together. Self-righteousness must be avoided at all costs.
- The discipline of children (1998, p.199). Different families hold different views. It is hard for anything positive to happen until trust is built among the members in the group and a relationship is established between children and members of the group. An older couple may be able to step in and help even before general trust is created. Their experience and seniority will generally enable them to get away with calling an unruly child into line or freeing an overprotected one from its parents. There are helpful techniques like re-directing the child's attention, placing them on their laps, etc.
- Domination by one person/family (1998, p.227). Allowing one person or family to preoccupy the group for an extended period undermines the health and sometimes the viability of the group. It can become a therapy group – but this is not its primary purpose. Constantly focussing on the need of one person or family drains the group of most of its resources. A balance needs to be struck between the needs of the various people in the group, as well as between people's needs and the God who can meet those needs. This builds energy to reach out to people outside of the group who have needs.
- Adults with special needs (1998, p.220). Vanier (cited in 1998, p.220), founder of L'Arche communities for the handicapped, reminds us that we

all are handicapped in one way or another. It is important to remember that we are not there to solve people's problems but to stand by them in their difficulties (1998, p.190).

- False expectations (1998, p.189). Bonhoeffer (cited in 1998, p.189) wrote, "Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian fellowship, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves. By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. He does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over us like a dream. God is not a God of the emotions, but the God of truth. Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all its unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God's sight – begins to grasp in faith the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community, the better for both. A community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis, which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered, permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community. Sooner or later it will collapse."

2.3. PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF LOCAL HOUSE CHURCH MEETINGS AND NETWORK STRUCTURES.

2.3.1. A network in the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropole.

According to H. Potgieter (2007, p.1) it 'came about' quite naturally on his family farm in Oyster Bay, E. Cape, in the late 1980's. During the years 1989-1991, this house church flourished, with many lives feeling the impact and strong relationships built among the members. In the words of Potgieter (2007, p.1), God revealed to them in one way and another how Christ's body should function.

As numerical growth continued, there was the attempt to 'organise' and structure this growth. However, soon these structures and systems seem to stifle the organic, spiritual life of the group and a stagnation set in. This process was repeated a number of times, with the same result (2007, p.1).

Helpful lessons were learned through consultation with his colleagues and friends who knew something about 'house church.' In particular, the book *Houses That Change the World* by Wolfgang Simson came into his hands which proved an enormous help and gave direction to his own thinking (2007, pp.1-5):

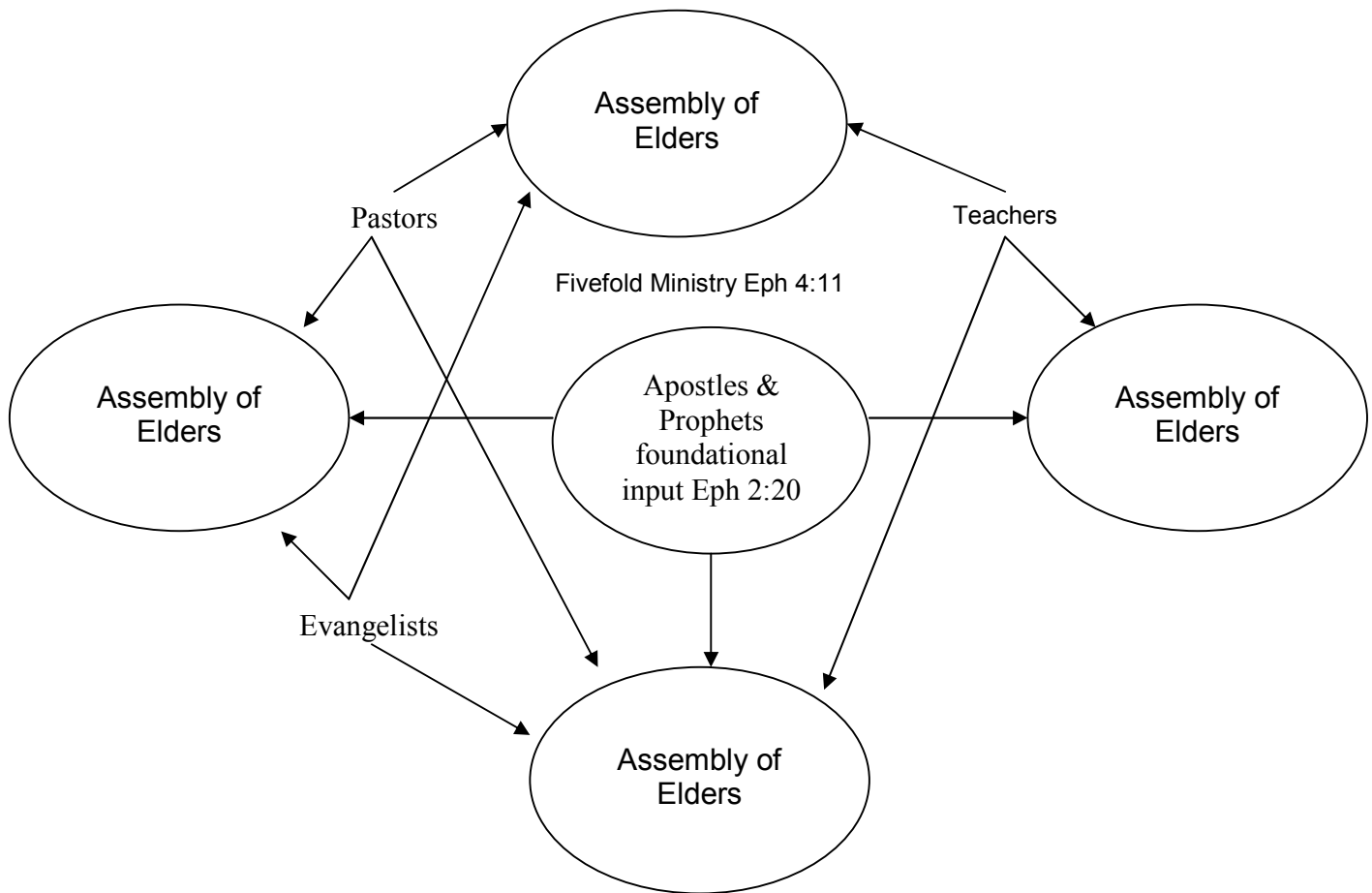
- He realised the importance of *relationships* and *fellowship* in the body of Christ. It comprises a group of people who care for one another on the basis of a firm relationship. This fellowship stemmed from that in the Trinity itself, where the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit interacted in relationship and fellowship. Family fellowship was practised among God's ancient people, the Jews – even meals contributed to the building of community. He saw this relationship also in the life and ministry of Jesus, Who so often made use of homes in furthering His kingdom. Things culminated on the Day of Pentecost, where 120 people came together without any human agenda – the Holy Spirit intervened, and the church was never the same again. The church became a living organism with one purpose, to fulfil God's purpose in the earth. Somebody said, 'the Bible is not cowskin and paper, it is the story of God looking for His family' (2007, p.20).
- The house churches in the early church were led by elders (1 Timothy 3), with the help of the 'five-fold' gifts of Ephesians 4:11. It was not about the office of 'apostle,' etc, so much as the function. The goal is always the equipping of the believers for the work of the ministry (Ephesians 4:11ff).
Potgieter failed to find the modern, single pastor-led model in the Scriptures: it was rather a plurality of elders.
- The church is about teaching and instruction, but more importantly it entails a thoroughly Christian lifestyle. Only a family can truly share life, hence the importance of the house church. Children participated in the early house churches and saw the truth modelled by their elders. See Deuteronomy 6 and 11.

- House churches should not be allowed to grow to more than 20 people – after that relationships are lost, hence the need to multiply house churches.
- From time to time house churches may group together in celebration and mutual projects (2007, p.11).

The purpose of the network?

It was established to enable house churches to freely associate with one another, find support and encouragement, so that they may enjoy all aspects of church-life (2007, p.11). There is no formal membership – all it takes is a trust built in one another via relationships. The benefits also include mutual stimulation, mutual prayer, sharing of materials, combined celebrations, teaching/equipping camps for men and women, the input of the ‘fivefold gifts,’ etc. The temptation to institutionalise the network is resisted at all costs.

A diagram reflecting the network (pto):



Today many house churches and more conventional [but progressive] congregations network together in Port Elizabeth, Uitenhage and Despatch. Besides these there is regular contact with house groups and congregations in Vryburg (N. Cape), Johannesburg, Pretoria, Kempton Park, etc.

Erroll Mulder, belonging to the network, oversees house churches in the Western Suburbs of Port Elizabeth as well as in the Greenbushes townships. He also mentors-by-distance some groups in Cape Town.

A recent development (January, 2009) is the writer's partnering with a colleague who is also planting groups in simple church format. Pastor Andre la Grange oversees a number of such groups in Port Elizabeth, as well as in Cape Town and the Free State.

We and our wives meet from time to time to discuss mutual interests and concerns, and for fellowship around the Lord's Supper.

2.3.2.

Other house churches in Port Elizabeth.

There are groups meeting in Walmer, Bushy Park and Colleen Glen, under the mentorship of Mr. Neil Hart.

In the past we have joined with this network for seminars on 'simple church' led by Floyd McClung from Cape Town. We keep in contact with Neil Hart and Floyd McClung.

2.3.3.

Networks in the Western Cape.

Unbeknown to the writer [until very recently, i.e. January 2010], **networks of house churches have been operating in Cape Town and surrounds for a number of years**, mainly among Afrikaans-speaking people.²²⁴ Groups operate in the city²²⁵ as well as in outlying towns and farming areas. The biggest part of the W. Cape network is made of groups in farming communities on the 'platteland.' Christian camps for farm-workers over the last few years have yielded a rich harvest. These groups are now slowly being established as house churches. The focus has been/continues to be very much on involvement of the people, with a focus on good relationship-building rather than on numerical growth. The network sees itself as a church-planting movement, aiming to grow by conversion-growth rather than transfer-growth (i.e. from other churches and denominations). Membership includes English and Afrikaans-speaking believers. This W. Cape group networks with house church groups in the UK and the Himalayas, e.g. Nepal, where church-planting via 'simple churches' is progressing at amazing speed.²²⁶

Botes (2009, pp.7-9,15) deals in some detail with **their network's theological base and values**, considering the Acts church, early Christian church (30-300 AD), minimum

²²⁴ Leaders include Dr. Pieter Vermeulen of Cape Town and Ds. Christo Botes of Wellington.

²²⁵ Some of the groups in Cape Town have been networking more formally from as recently as Easter, 2009.

²²⁶ A DVD teaching series on house church, *The Acts Church Today*, together with their house church values, is available via their website www.theactschurch.org.za

characteristics of a 'NT Church,' denominationalism, etc. He (2009, pp.7ff) also shares insights from Wolfgang Simson and Frank Viola.²²⁷

He (2009, pp.16ff) writes of 'A Church of House Groups,' and under this heading deals with house church leadership, district leadership, core leadership, finances, ministries to children, etc.

As to **leadership and structures**, Botes (2009, pp.19ff) explains these in terms of four circles:

- a) The innermost circle is the house groups with an elder as leader. This is the primary circle of decision-making, where every member is involved.
- b) The second circle is the house church leadership from all the house groups. They meet once per month.
- c) The third circle is the regional leadership that organises quarterly, full-day meetings.
- d) The fourth circle is the core leadership that organises special events, such as holiday weekend activities and other conferences. These leaders are immediately available for advice to all house groups in the city, countryside or overseas. This core leadership is in no way hierarchical. They link with other house church networks in other parts of SA and the world so as to prevent insularity.

Their **structuring of children's and youth ministry** is interesting, catering for intergenerational ministry as well as youth interests (2009, p.29).

The biblical and spiritual education of the children and teens are **the responsibility of the parents in the first place**. These obviously take place in the home. All children attend Services, in order to be exposed to inter-generational worship and ministry. The youngest, who cannot for obvious reasons participate in the Services, are handled in another room by parents via age-suitable activities. Parents with very young children are encouraged to meet socially during the week to discuss common needs.

²²⁷ See Bibliography.

In terms of **basic doctrine and church discipline**, groups are exhorted to hold to the Bible as well as the Apostles Creed.

2.3.4.

House church experiments in the Western Suburbs/Townships of Port Elizabeth [2007-2010].

Toward the end of 2006, the writer moved on from the 'pastorate,' and, as a result of reading and thinking over the previous few years, sensed God's direction to engage in house church ministry connected to strong outreach to the poverty-stricken of the Greenbushes community.

The writer and his wife commenced a home gathering each Sunday morning in our own home, involving ourselves plus a few people who had indicated a hunger for such more intimate fellowship. Children were included and fully involved from the outset.

Soon the gathering grew too large for the Mulder's lounge and they started moving around to other houses in the Western Suburbs.

From this 'mother house church' they established two groups in Greenbushes, the one in Lusaka, connected with a small AIDS hospice – the other in Ericadene, connected with a home for abandoned and AIDS-positive babies and children. A further group in North End, has come about through the nurture of an ex-prisoner (since deceased) and his family and friends.

The mother group gatherings started drawing unchurched people through relationships, some professed faith and were baptised in a home swimming pool. We began to realise that the group was becoming too large – in a sense we did not have to multiply because four members, and ultimately two more, were transferred to other cities and overseas. The majority of those leaving have very recently set out to plant a similar house church in Cape Town. These will be mentored by distance by the writer, and have been put into contact with a friend in Cape Town who has led a group for a year or two now.

All the while the writer and his wife have kept open relationships with progressive congregations, and once a month gathered for a combined celebration with the Network, meeting in Bluewater Bay and latterly in Glenroy. In this way there has been input with

the enrichment of wider gifts than what they presently have in our house churches in the Western Suburbs.

Their vision is to grow spontaneously and organically, seeking to remain effective in impacting our immediate community. Their members see themselves as 'marketplace ministers' in their workplace, school, etc. They are also assisting the Kuyga School SCO in weekly discipling some 130 children, with training days and camps for life-skills, leadership, small group activities, etc, being held over weekends.

2.3.5.

A typical house church meeting.

In the writer's house churches, the meeting format is loosely based on Acts 2:42-47. The group would typically begin with informal, spontaneous worship made up of scripture, prayers, worship songs/hymns, words of personal testimony, etc. Following such interaction there will be something for the children – a scripture illustrated visually, a relevant story from the Bible or some secular source, with participation and interaction. Children are encouraged to remain in the meeting, but from time to time will be released following their teaching to participate in ball-games and other activities. We will then go on to discuss a scripture, notice of which has been given during the week for the sake of personal preparation. The writer or another with some 'elder' qualifications may give teaching on a relevant subject, allowing for interaction, response and spiritual ministry arising out of this teaching/discussion.

Often everything will be arranged around Communion, in which everyone gets to participate, or even an *Agape*-meal, in early church tradition. Some attention is given to outside and world needs, by way of discussion and intercession. Once a month we have house church in a home for abandoned/orphaned children in a nearby township, so as to ensure practical ministry in the context of a needy community.

There is no rigid formula for meetings, although we keep to the basic ingredients of the Acts passages, 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, etc.

Botes (2009, pp.18-19) outlines in some detail **a typical house church meeting in the Western Cape network:**

- Spontaneous worship (15 minutes).
- Ministry of the Word to smaller children (7 minutes), young people (10 minutes), and to everybody (20 minutes), with an opportunity for immediate response after every ministry. Members are encouraged to be sensitive to the specific emphasis that the Spirit may be highlighting during such ministry.
- Quiet reflection in the presence of God and a focus on His character – this would include some songs of worship (20 minutes).
- The Lord's Supper (10 minutes).
- Ministry to each other in prayer, etc (20 minutes).
- Close of the meeting after approximately two hours, remembering that there is only one Service on a Sunday.²²⁸

3. YOUTH AND THE POOR AT THE FOREFRONT.

Frost and Hirsch (2003, p.223) believe that, **when it comes to the mission of the church in touching the untouched masses through new forms of church and ministry, younger people²²⁹ will be at the forefront** – most 'revolutions' are! The 'people power' revolution in the Philippines, the downfall of Suharto in Indonesia, the Jesus revolution of the 1960's were initiated and advanced by young people. Thus much of our future as the church lies in the precarious hands and hearts of a generation that finds it difficult to decide and commit – however there are heartening signs all over the world that the younger people are rising up as torch-bearers of the gospel. The authors remind us of the words of Paulo Coelho's words (cited in 2003, p.223), *The ship is safest when it's in port. But that's not what ships were made for.*

²²⁸ House groups decide independently whether they want to have an *agape*-meal every Sunday, before or after the meeting.

²²⁹ Surely also 'the young at heart' – there will always be a need for 'spiritual fathers and mothers' in any revolution (see 1 Cor. 4:14-17). The writer does not want to be left out!

According to David Harley also (2002, Part 2 & 5), we need to recognize increasingly *the rôle of the young, poor and uneducated in addition to the affluent and sophisticated, in the matter of mission*. Speaking as General Director of OMF in 2002 at the Singapore Bible College, Harley raised two issues:

- a) *The need to recognise the ministry of the young in the mission of the church* (2002, Part 2,5). He relates how a Korean missionary told him that his church had shrunk from 5,000 to 3,000 in just a few years, the decline being made up mostly of young members. He identified the reasons for this phenomenon as materialism and the traditionalism of the church. Harley noted that these problems were not confined to Korea but evident in Europe, Africa and other parts of Asia. While there are no easy answers, he had observed that churches that were willing to adapt their patterns of worship and allow their younger members to exercise leadership and ministry, continued to attract the younger generation, so vital to the church's mission to a world full of young people.²³⁰
- b) *The need to recognise the contribution of the poor and uneducated in world evangelism, as much as the rich and sophisticated* (2002, Part 2 6). "Today ... much of the growth of the church in the world is occurring not through high profile crusade or mission strategies but through the work of ordinary Christians giving testimony to Jesus to their neighbours. According to Dr. Rajendran, the General Secretary of the Indian Missionary Alliance, most of the church growth in India today is the result of the work of village evangelists. Often they have fourth grade education or less but they are willing and able to live simply and travel light and go from place to place to plant churches. 'Bible College students are unable to do this,' he said: 'They cannot cope with the simplicity of village life. They have become too sophisticated.'"

²³⁰ Not that the older generation is left out in the great task of the church! Futurist, Dr. Piet Muller, speaking on RSG's 'Kollig op die Kerk' on Sunday 11th and 18th October 2009 (at 7:10 am), has featured some of his research on the role of the elderly in society and in the church today. He mentioned the common factor in long-living groups of people as that of continued responsibilities in their communities. He also mentioned the potential of harnessing the older generation in churches, commenting on how many corporate businesses in the USA are re-hiring 80-year old citizens for their skills, more especially their *people-skills* gleaned over the years. By contrast, in our SA society, many who retire at age 65 (especially men) 'go home to die!' The best part of their life could just be starting!

4. HANDLING CRITICISM FROM WITHIN.

Historically, every new move of God has been accompanied by criticism from within the church.

Barna (2005, p.111) reminds us that as we today look back to the great revivals of the church such as the 18th century 'Great Awakening' under Whitefield and Wesley, we need to remember that they had a multitude of critics especially from within the church because of their unorthodox means of reaching people, etc. Many felt that the revivalists had disrupted the status and flow of existing communities, threatened the stability of society, undermined the security and authority of pastors and denominational executives, etc. Barna (2005, p.112) adds that 'energetic resistance has accompanied every significant episode of growth in the Kingdom since the time of Christ.' "The revolution of faith that is emerging today is no different. If you mention that millions of devout Christians whose lives are centred on knowing, loving and serving God live independently of a local church (as we have known it – the writer), you can count on criticism from the church establishment."

5. OPENNESS TO REFORMATION AND RENEWAL.

Frost and Hirsch (2003, pp.204-206) press this matter strongly. Most churches and denominations are in decline and things are not well on 'The Good Ship Christendom' – therefore **we should all be aware of the need for renewal. Renewal distinctives include** (Snyder, cited in 2003, pp.204-205):

- A thirst for renewal
- A new stress on the Holy Spirit
- Institutional-charismatic tension
- Counter-culture communities
- Ministry to the poor
- Energy and dynamism

6. THE TIMES ARE URGENT! [AS TO CHURCH RE-STRUCTURING]

Fourteen years ago already Snyder (1996, pp.194ff) highlighted *the urgency of revising church structures*. As social acceleration increases, only those churches that are structured flexibly and biblically will be able to keep up. These churches will offer the best conditions for the church truly to be the messianic community in difficult days and to withstand persecution. The church will increasingly have to choose between a charismatic and an institutional/bureaucratic model for its life and structure.

The reformation and renewal of church structures is ‘up against it.’

Viola quotes Austin-Sparks (cited in 2008, p.255),

“What is called ‘Christianity’ – and what has come to be called ‘the church’ – has become a tradition, an institution, and a system quite as fixed, rooted, and established as ever Judaism was, and it will be no less costly to change it fundamentally than was the case with Judaism. Superficial adjustments may be made – and are being made – but a very heavy price is attached to the change which is necessary to really solve the great problem. It may very well be, as in the time of the Lord, that the essential light will not be given to very many because God knows that they would never pay the price. It may only be a ‘remnant’ – as of old – who will be led into God’s answer because they will meet then demands at all costs.”

Viola (2008, p.256) asks a valid question: can the institutional church be changed from *within*? Part of the answer is: Those who have sought to revamp the established church from within have met with serious resistance and frustration.²³¹

“My experience suggests that unless the extrabiblical clergy system is dismantled in a particular church, efforts to recover the organic nature of church life will be handcuffed... The pastor will feel threatened; the staff will resist the disruption of the status quo; the congregation will be thrown into a

²³¹The writer’s personal view and experience, for what it is worth, would very much endorse this viewpoint.

panic; individual believers will be utterly confused; and the people calling for change will find themselves the target of personal attack” (2008, p.256).

Viola (2008, p.270) goes on to speak of the many church leaders who have left their clerical professions and laid down their high-powered hierarchical positions to learn what it means to be a simple brother in an organic expression of the church. Such have left the clergy system out of conscience – many of them are church-planters today and God is using them significantly.

7. REALISM AND HOPE!

Many years ago Bonhoeffer (cited in Richardson, 2007, pp.207-208) uttered a ‘trumpet call’ never to lose hope or despair of a true fellowship of churches ever materialising – that call needs to be heeded again: “The believer believes only in God, who makes and does the impossible, who makes life from death and who has called the dying church to life against and despite of us and through us, though he alone does it.” Bonhoeffer saw not only a future for the church, but the church as the only hope for peace in the world. “The crucified Christ is our peace. He alone exorcises the idols and the demons. The world trembles only before the cross, not before us (2007, p.108). To follow this Christ involves the Christian in *life for others...*’ (2007, p.108).

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