

CHAPTER 3

THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO EVANGELIZE: START NEW CHURCHES

The two *primary* focuses of healthy house churches are outreach and discipleship, rather than fellowship alone. This is because the biblical focus of the Church is outreach and discipleship. Great fellowship *is* a healthy by-product of the house church that consistently reaches out to others—but it cannot be the goal if you want your house church to fully please God.

Prayer and interaction are encouraged within house churches in order to meet needs and form internal relationships, but the top priority should always be to bring in those who do not know Jesus. This causes the house church to mature and reproduce itself and gives more believers the opportunity to use the gifts the Lord has given to them to reach the lost and make disciples, as well as equipping more people for leadership. Instead of merely watching the functioning of church once a week, each member of the community becomes an active part of the Church, because they work together with the common goal of reaching out to others.

The greatest catalyst for spiritual growth in Christ is turning our eyes from ourselves and setting our sight on Jesus and the needs of those around us. A group of people who are always looking inward and who are content with the status quo will never grow and multiply. When house churches become content

to stay the same, they build walls around themselves, causing others to feel unwelcome. On the other hand, the group that has a heart to reach out and to disciple new believers will be willing to change and will enjoy tremendous fellowship and meaningful relationships in the process. All this is to say that an outward focus benefits everyone in the long run, whereas looking inward prevents growth and, like an ingrown toenail, usually causes pain. Looking inward also results in competition and stagnation or, worse, spiritual pride.

We realize that some may disagree with the purpose of the house church, but we believe that we stand on biblical ground when we say that the Church exists to bring glory to God and to introduce people to Jesus. In John 15, Jesus declares to the disciples that they were called to base their lives on the three core values of the Kingdom: to rest daily in the Father's love, to love one another, and to bear witness to Him in the world.

The Great Commission was given to every Christian, not just to the first disciples. When Jesus declared that His disciples are commissioned to go into the world on mission for Him, He did not say that they could vote on whether or not it is a good idea! We, as Jesus' disciples, are sent people. God has one goal: that His own glory would fill the Earth. And God has designed one way to accomplish His goal: through those who know, love and obey His Son, Jesus.

There will be many different creative approaches to reaching the lost and making disciples as we work together in a house-church setting; however, the primary vision must be clear and fixed—we are called to fulfill the Great Commission. Fulfilling the Great Commission requires more than just having weekly evangelistic teachings at our home-church meetings or going out on the street to evangelize. The Great Commission works toward fulfillment when, as individuals in house churches, we reach beyond ourselves to make disciples in our sphere of

influence. Through that process, we will discover that God will give us many creative ideas and opportunities. Even if no one immediately comes to Christ through these opportunities, there is a spiritual dynamic released in a community of people that keeps the focus on those who do not know Jesus instead of primarily on individual home-group members. A community of people who have a God-inspired mission and value healthy relationships will be a vibrant community. As we build intentional, authentic relationships, we will impact people's lives.

At the heart of home churches, then, is God's mission. The mission field is the world—the business world, the world of education, the world of arts and entertainment, the worlds of government, science, industry and the marketplace. Some in the Church go to a world of lost people in other nations, and some go to a world of lost people at work or school. Every “world” in which we live and work and play is God's world. When Jesus said that as Christians we are to go into all the world, He meant exactly that. And when He said, “As the Father has sent me, so I also send you,” He was absolutely serious.

New Churches Provide More Opportunities to Share Jesus

Dr. C. Peter Wagner, leader of Global Harvest Ministries, has said for years that “the single most effective way to evangelize is to plant new churches.”¹

Fuller Theological Seminary did a research study that found that if a church is 10 or more years old, it takes 85 people to lead 1 person to Christ. If the church is between 4 and 7 years old, it takes 7 people to lead 1 person to Christ. If a church is less than 3 years old, it takes only 3 people to lead 1 person to Christ (see diagram on next page):²

Age of Church	People/Salvation Ratio
10+ years old	85:1
4 to 7 years old	7:1
3 years and under	3:1

The results of this study make it abundantly clear: Planting new churches is the most effective way to reach more people. Church planting keeps our faith alive and our focus clear. As micro-churches are planted, we can ask God to reproduce them rapidly within an area. And as the network of these simple churches grows, there will be more and more opportunities to reach people with good news.

Within a network of house churches, some will be more evangelistic than others, depending on the makeup of the persons in the church. This is understandable, but we must not back off from Jesus' command to share His love with those who don't know Him. We are all called to carry our Lord's heart, to reach those people who have not yet decided to follow Christ. Each micro-church needs to strive toward the goal of Jesus' mandate to seek and save those who are lost.

A great example is a group of house churches in Keswick, Ontario, that consists of mostly new believers. They are bringing many nonbelievers into the "family" thanks to their new expression of a more relaxed church atmosphere. These new Christians bring their non-Christian and Christian friends to house-church meetings, where they simply hang out and talk about life and how the Bible applies to everyday situations. These people, and so many others, want spirituality made real. They want *talk* translated into *action*. House churches provide that place of interaction and authenticity.

As the house churches in Ontario prove, it doesn't take long-time believers to affect others for Christ. Some argue, though, that when you have a lot of babies, you will have a lot of messes. When people come to Christ, things can get messy. While this may be true, usually the messy times are when we all grow spiritually. Bring on the babies in Christ! Proverbs 14:4 tells us, "Where there are no oxen, the manger is empty. But from the strength of an ox comes an abundant harvest." We want the abundant harvest, so we are willing to put up with some messes!

Some people tell us that we don't *need* more churches. Let us show you why we *do*. Here is an example: As I (Larry) mentioned earlier, I live in the historically religious community of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where there are currently more than 600 churches. That's a lot of churches! However, when you consider the county's population, the current church attendance at each of these churches shows that only 17 percent of the people in our county are involved in the local church.

If 800 new house churches consisting of 25 people each were started this year in our county, the Church would still only be reaching 21.5 percent of the population. This puts things in perspective. We need more community churches, more mega-churches and more house churches networking together to reach those without Christ!

Although for years we have been told that, on average, 40 percent of Americans attend church on a regular basis, we disagree. The picture of what is happening in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, is true of church attendance all across our nation. Recent studies show the following:

While the U.S. population grew by 13.2 percent from 1900 to 2000 . . . total church attendance grew by only 3 percent. From 2000 to 2004, the U.S. population

growth grew by a slightly slower rate—4 percent—while church attendance growth grew by 0.8 percent. By 2020, only about 14 percent of Americans will go to church. By 2050, the figure will drop to less than 10 percent.³

America is rapidly becoming a post-Christian nation. We need to wake up and re-evangelize our own country.

What is the best way to re-evangelize? We need new expressions of church that are relevant and close to people's everyday lives. Though some people will only go to a large, impersonal meeting to learn more about following Jesus, we believe that the vast majority of Americans will come to faith in Christ through personal relationships with people who follow Him. We also believe that small, simple, non-building-oriented, non-professional-led, family-based communities are some of the keys for re-evangelizing our nation.

In a recent conversation with a mega-church pastor, I (Floyd) expressed that while mega-churches were growing in number and influence in America, the result was deceptive, because overall we were losing ground. The pastor wouldn't believe me.

There is a false impression that because mega-churches are growing, the Church is growing. The truth is that a smaller and smaller percentage of Americans are willing to attend large, impersonal church meetings. They are searching for more. While mega-churches are growing, the overall numbers of churches and followers of Christ are decreasing in America.

Healthy House Churches Rapidly Reproduce

House-church networks reproduce churches rapidly because the micro-church model lends itself to more authentic relational connections, deeper and more natural discipleship accountability, quick reproduction of leaders and every-member involvement.

According to David Garrison in his book *Church Planting Movements*:

Church planters often speak of church planting in birthing terms, asking, “How long does it take to birth a new church?” This gestation period varies around the world, just as it does within the animal kingdom. Elephants typically require 22 months to produce an offspring, while rabbits can yield a new litter every three months. Church Planting Movements reproduce like rabbits!⁴

It is not hard to see that the numerical potential of micro-churches is enormous.

In Restricted Areas, Churches Meet in Homes

In many cities in America, the construction of church buildings is no longer allowed within the city limits because of zoning restrictions. Exploding urban populations prohibit obtaining real estate to build a church structure. House churches are an obvious solution to this dilemma. Instead of fighting city hall, maybe we should seize the opportunity to multiply multiple numbers of small, simple church communities.

In some parts of the world, house churches start as a matter of necessity, born out of other kinds of legal bans. In my book *House to House*,⁵ I (Larry) tell the story of a church in Ethiopia that was forced underground. In 1982, half of all the evangelical churches in Ethiopia were closed due to harassment, legal banning and persecution. The Meserete Kristos Church, for example, 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.

The Meserete Kristos Church membership at that time was approximately 5,000. As the fires of persecution got hotter and 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 the church buildings in the early 1980s 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 persecution, these believers met from house to house in small groups. Hundreds of believers began to get involved in the work of ministry in these small house churches. They no longer focused on the church building or church programs. Instead, their time together was spent in prayer and making disciples, reaching those who did not yet know Jesus.

As evident in the Ethiopian church of the late twentieth century, God's agenda for the building of His kingdom includes outreach and discipleship. He wants laborers who are trained to bring in the full harvest: "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (John 4:34-36).

Learning from History—The Methodist Revival

We can learn from historical accounts that small groups have often served to fan revival throughout Church history. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, for example, understood Jesus' concept of putting new wine into new wineskins. He started class meetings to disciple the new believers who were coming to Christ during the Methodist revival in eighteenth-century England. A key to the revival was the

accountability that the believers found in the small groups:

The classes were in effect house churches . . . meeting in various neighborhoods where people lived. The class leaders (men and women) were disciplers. The classes normally met one evening each week for an hour or so. Each person reported on his or her spiritual progress, or on particular needs or problems, and received the support and prayers of the others . . . The class meeting system tied together the widely scattered Methodist people and became the sustainer of the Methodist renewal over many decades. Now here is the remarkable thing. One hears today that it is hard to find enough leaders for small groups or for those to carry on the other responsibilities in the church. Wesley put one in ten, perhaps one in five, to work in significant ministry and leadership. And who were these people? Not the educated or the wealthy with time on their hands, but laboring men and women, husbands and wives and young folks with little or no training, but with spiritual gifts and eagerness to serve . . . Not only did Wesley reach the masses; he made leaders of thousands of them.⁶

Gradually, however, the Methodist believers put more emphasis on the weekly church meetings in their buildings. As they de-emphasized the accountability relationships they had in their class meetings, the revival movement began to decline.

Peter Bunton, in his book *Cell Groups and House Churches: What History Teaches Us*, studies a number of examples of house-church meetings in history. For example, Martin Bucer, a key figure in the sixteenth-century Reformation, advocated a radical church reformation, which was to begin in small groups or *Christian communities*:

Indeed he taught that partaking in such little communities modeled on the New Testament was the only way to keep the Ten Commandments. Additionally, what is of interest is that each group remained connected to others. The leaders were to meet each week, and every one to two months there should be a meeting of all groups in the parish for teaching. (This has some semblance of the structure that Wesley was to establish some two hundred years later.)⁷

Down through history, many movements have emerged to bring the Church back to the way it was in the first century. The house-church vision is a radical reformation of church structure that fits the New Testament configuration of believers meeting in homes.

The Early Church started to erect their own buildings more than 250 years after their beginnings. For centuries, believers met in church buildings for the greater part of their church experience. The modern-day Church has become accustomed to Christians gathering in a church building every Sunday, and it is hard to break that mold. In fact, this form of tradition for tradition's sake gets us into trouble, because we begin to trust a method rather than trusting God for fresh expressions of church that engage our culture and touch our friends' and neighbors' lives. Any church structure, including house churches, can become legalistic and traditional when those who attend trust the method or structure rather than staying flexible and open to God's leading.

House-Church Networks and Missions

Western missionaries have had a tendency to export the only type of wineskin they have experienced—the community church

or the mega-church. On the other hand, missionaries who are sent out of house-church networks or from outward-focused cell-based churches project the basic Christian community and New Testament house-church life that they have experienced. Since house-church networks follow the simple pattern in the book of Acts, they can work in any nation or culture. Whereas missionaries from larger-program and building-based churches need to unlearn much of what they have experienced in order to effectively minister the gospel in unreached areas, missionaries with house-church backgrounds don't need to reverse their education.

Much of the training that I (Floyd) do in preparing cross-cultural church planters is to help them unlearn unhelpful and irrelevant models of church that do not fit the needs or cultures of the 3.1 billion people on our planet who have never heard of Jesus. As I lead people through six months of intensive training and coaching to launch their church planting efforts, I find that much of what I do is to help them step away from Western models of church that focus on buildings, programs and educational theories. In my experience, Western church models are unhelpful in most situations and downright harmful in a few situations.⁸

Although our experience has been mostly with small groups in mega-churches and community churches, DOVE Christian Fellowship International, the network of churches that a team of leaders and I (Larry) oversee, has broadened its vision in the last six years to include house-church networks. In light of this change, we have added special training for house-church planters in our current yearly Church Planting and Leadership School. Students from many different movements and denominations come to Pennsylvania one weekend each month for nine months of networking and training on church planting and leadership.⁹

The Mission of God Through House Churches

Jim is an American working in the marketplace who recently realized that he could accomplish the mission of God at his workplace. “I get it now,” he said. “I’m a carpenter, but my primary calling is to represent Jesus. I look at the people around me and at the work I do and realize that I am there because I am on a mission for God. I live purposely and have a sense of calling on my life. Every day I wake up and say, ‘What assignment do you have for me today, Lord?’”

One of the beauties of house churches is that they catch a sense of destiny from their involvement in simple church communities. House-church members ask, “What’s my part? What’s my part in reaching people for Jesus? Why has God placed me here? What is God up to and how do I work with God?” They realize they have been called. They are God’s people, invading His world and joining His mission for His glory.

On a visit to central India several years ago, I (Floyd) spent time with about a hundred rural house-church leaders. They led small, simple village churches, none larger than 20 or 30 people. As they listened to the reports their coworkers shared about what God was doing in neighboring villages, and as I told stories from Central Asia and China and other parts of the world, they became animated. When I asked one of the senior leaders why this touched them so deeply, he responded, “It gives them dignity and hope. They feel they are part of something big and important.” Indeed they are! If only we in the West could get our hope and significance from being part of the big thing God is doing in the world—and not from clothes, possessions, status and other worldly things.

Whatever we do as Christians is for God’s glory. The focus of everything we do should be for God. It’s important to remember that even church is not for us—it’s for God! He did not lead

us to Himself for our glory, but for His. When we believe this with all our hearts, it will give us the same sense of hope and significance as our brothers and sisters in India.

You've probably noticed that there is one main character in the Bible—God! The Bible is God's story. Yet, often when we read the Bible, we read it as if it were about *us*. We look for verses containing encouragement and guidance for *us*. Romans 15:7 tells us that the goal of all we do is for God to be glorified. God's great longing is to fill the earth with His glory. He wants to impact and impress all of Creation with His goodness and greatness.

God longs to accomplish His mission through His people in the world. If the starting point of all we do is not right, everything else will be out of alignment. If we get off track right from the beginning, we will miss our destiny down the road. God must be the goal of everything—the focus, the reason, the aim—of everything we do. God has a mission and He wants everyone to be a part of it. The mission is to glorify Himself through His great mercy.

When we are made right in God's eyes, we are saved for God and called to join Him in spreading the good news of His love and mercy. The new covenant, the covenant of mercy and grace that has brought us into relationship with God, is first of all for God. We are saved for God first, then ourselves.

If the focus and goal of God's plan for all eternity is His own glory, then we are called to seek, savor and spread His glory. The Church is not divided into the called and the uncalled, those who go and those who stay, those who live for His glory and those who don't. We are on a mission for God—not a secret mission, but an all-consuming mission, and that mission is the glory of God.

A Christian engineer is to be just as intentional in fulfilling his mission on the job as is a missionary in Thailand. We are all called to belong to Jesus. We are called with passions and vocations. There is no unholy place and no unholy vocation to God.

As a church planter in the red-light district of Amsterdam, a mentor once said to me, “Floyd, I want to tell you that the red-light district is a holy place.” Well, you can be sure *I* had not thought of it that way! He continued, “The Bible says the whole earth is the Lord’s. That means the devil is a squatter here in the red-light district.”

If that is true—that the whole earth is the Lord’s and that He has designed different dimensions of life involving commerce, education, government and the arts—if He created those spheres of life and put aspirations in us to work and serve in those particular arenas, then what we call “vocations” are *holy callings*. This means that God, by His divine plan, places burdens and desires and abilities and passions in each of us. In doing so, He distributes different aspects of His nature and character in His people. It is God, by His Spirit, who urges us to live for His glory in the different vocations of life. It is God who seeks to mobilize His people who are to live intentionally for His mission and glory.

Joining the Mission of God

When we moved years back to a new neighborhood in Kansas City—a neighborhood of 39 homes—Sally and I (Floyd) believed that we didn’t just buy a house we liked; God sent us there to reach our new neighbors for Christ. At the first homeowners meeting we attended, we were appalled by the hostility among our neighbors. The meeting included threats of suing and people shouting obscenities at each other—and gossiping campaigns ran rampant.

Although I was pastoring a community church at the time, our neighborhood was *also* a place God had sent us to do church for Him. As His church in that place, we joined God’s mission in prayer for our neighbors. We conducted regular prayer walks around the neighborhood. The more problems there were, the

more we prayed. I'd go from house to house late at night and stand in front of our neighbors' homes and say, "God, I invite you into this home. I give you a personal invitation to interrupt their lives." I prayed blessings over them. I prayed for their marriages, their kids and their jobs.

We targeted one lady in particular who just loved to fight and stir up trouble in the neighborhood. After one particularly bad episode, Sally and I bought her a bouquet of flowers and asked to take her and her husband out for dinner. On Mother's Day and other holidays, we gave her gifts and thanked her for her positive contributions to our neighborhood. Although it was a stretch to find them, there were a few positive things she did for the neighborhood.

Through these simple acts of hospitality and prayer, we joined God's mission in our neighborhood. His mission does not have to be pumped up or hyped. We don't have to start it or defend it. God owns His mission, and He will do His mission through us if we allow Him.

Notes

1. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), p. 11.
2. "Enlarging Our Borders," American Society for Church Growth (ASCG), report presented to the Executive Presbytery, January 1999.
3. Dave Olson, "Empty Pews, Signs of Hope," *The Covenant Companion*, February 2006, p. 11. http://www.covchurch.org/uploads/mR/5V/mR5VwQf_FolOjJE2DKfOJg/0602FutureorFad.pdf (accessed December 2006).
4. David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements* (Bangalore, India: WIGTake Resources, 2004), p. 194.
5. Larry Kreider, *House to House* (Lititz, PA: House to House Publications, 1995), p. 102.
6. Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 53-57, 63.
7. Peter Bunton, *Cell Groups and House Churches: What History Teaches Us* (Lititz, PA: House to House Publications, 2001), p. 14.
8. See Floyd's personal website: www.floydandsally.com for more about how he trains church planters, or write to Floyd at floyd.mcclung@gmail.com for more information.
9. See DOVE Christian Fellowship International's many training options under "Training Schools" at www.dcfi.org.