



Briefing Papers

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HOUSE CHURCHES

I've been a Christian for longer than most of my readers have been alive. During that time, I've lived in different parts of the UK and have spent time in many different denominations and expressions of church. I've benefited from Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, both Brethren and Elim, Free Churches, different streams of the New Church movement, and from time to time I've been part of the House Church movement. I've not tested the waters of the Roman Catholic Church, but we have spiritual directors who are Catholics. So no thoroughbred here, I'm very much the mongrel. I call my early years as a Christian my arrogant phrase, where I decided that the established churches had lost their way, were mired in traditionalism and error; they were thoroughly unbiblical, and the only solution was to get right away from being contaminated by them and get back to pure New Testament principles. Don't worry, I've long since repented of all this nonsense.

Nevertheless, part of me still retains a strong affection for the simplicity of the unstructured, uncluttered small groups of people meeting in homes to worship God along New Testament lines. I think small can be very beautiful indeed and there's much to learn from their example. (Having said that, just as there are healthy expressions of house church, there are also many hundreds of healthy expressions of churches across the denominations.)

This briefing is for my readers involved in churches that meet in homes, giving firstly some ecclesiological encouragements and then some practical tips.

PART 1: THE ECCESIOLOGY BEHIND CHUCHES THAT MEET IN HOMES

These are notes written by Ed Stetzer. Ed holds the Billy Graham Distinguished Chair of Church, Mission, and Evangelism at Wheaton College, is Executive Director of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, and publishes church leadership resources through Mission Group.

The house church discussion is always an interesting one. People can be very passionate about simple, and organic house churches.

Some say, "Of course, that's the best way—that's what is in the New Testament!" And, actually, they are right about the New Testament. However, it can be tricky to evaluate something that you are convinced is the only right way.

On the other hand, house churches are far from the norm in the English-speaking Western world. And, as such, unfamiliar for many. To be honest, many readers will have had experiences with house church people that is less than positive. (I hear often from pastors about disgruntled or theologically-odd people ending up in house churches.)

The fact is, there are healthy and unhealthy expressions of house churches.

HEALTHY & UNHEALTHY EXPRESSIONS OF HOUSE CHURCHES

Let's be clear even if you had a bad experience, there are many healthy expressions of house churches.

First, many are excellent in discipleship. They focus on the simple elements of discipleship, which enhances the effectiveness to rapidly reproduce.

Second, house churches often release believers into areas of leadership and service at a higher rate than other models.

Third, house churches are simple and stripped of all the glitz and glamor. As a result, people are reached with the gospel through relationships.

Neil Cole, who is intimately involved with the house church movement and has the best and most winsome writing on the subject, often says, *"What churches win people with, is what churches win them to."*

Thus, house churches do not have to worry about adding additional ministries in order to keep people committed or entertained, especially in a culture where the attention span of consumeristic people is diminishing and where brand loyalty is waning.

But, just as in other models, there are also some unhealthy elements within house churches. Too many house churches are filled with people who got burned by the more institutionalised church. Thus, house churches tend to attract dissatisfied people—sometimes the angry children of evangelical megachurches.

The reality is, dissatisfaction does not a movement make.

In addition, most house churches aren't places where one will find the singing to be excellent, the teaching and preaching to be proficient, and the children/youth programmes to be safe, secure, and engaging. This 'organic' flavour may not be palatable for some, but it's certainly countercultural.

This countercultural reality is one of the reasons we have no house church focused Church Planting Movements in the West like we do in much of the rest of the world.

But this counterculture approach may be the reason many are reaching people now, and may indeed reach more in the future.

So, there is good and bad, for sure.

THE APPEAL OF HOUSE CHURCHES

Yet, I believe there's an appeal house churches have among some church planters and specific cultural contexts.

I was recently with two Lutheran (LCMS) pastors. Lutherans have a very institutionalised ecclesiology. In addition, they map out the ministry process for their pastors: the pastors go to college, then Concordia, and then the bishop tells them where they are going.

But these two Lutheran pastors took a different approach. They went to the bishop and said they didn't want to go just anywhere. They wanted to graduate from seminary, move to a community, work at Home Depot, and plant a church relationally with their colleagues and neighbours.

These pastors wanted to take a path less traveled. They wanted:

To go where led

To not be restricted by money or funding

To be part of a church that was high on relationships

To be simple in their approach

To be naturally ingrained into the rhythms of the community

To see a church birthed from intentional discipleship

Many church planters, if we are honest, find this appealing. And it's in this appeal that there's great potential for the house church.

It's appealing because it's biblical, missional, contextual, and more.

House churches may not only appeal to certain church planters, but also to certain cultural contexts. Certain contexts may be conducive for house churches:

Restricted areas

Closed countries

College campuses

Large apartment complexes

Urban or high-density areas where the cost of living is expensive

People who are disenfranchised, weary, or intimidated by the more institutional and organised forms of charity

CONCLUSION

Some may be nervous about the house church movement. Some worry that house churches don't have all the marks of a biblical church. However, house churches can have all those marks for a very simple reason: otherwise, you'd have to rule out the first 100 years of Christianity, since that's what they did.

Given the healthy expressions of house churches and the appeal house churches have to certain planters and in certain cultural contexts, evangelicals need to be more open to house churches.

I'm not trying to give a full evaluation here, but simply to say there are good things (and some not as good things). It's good to acknowledge both, but to also give house churches a chance if you've already rejected the idea.

However, and this is a big however, house church leaders need to know that most of us have seen a lot of unhealthy expressions (like in traditional church as well, I know!), so some may be hesitant.

As healthy expressions grow, or their stories are told (as I try to do here), we can see more and better examples of house churches.

PART 2: PRACTICAL ELEMENTS FOR RUNNING A CHURCH IN YOUR HOME

These are some thoughts from Douglas the pastor of a church that met in his home for more than 20 years.

I will give you a list of things we found and did and let you pick through it

1. It will obviously depend on the vision with regard to growth. That is, what to do when you get too big for the house; you can use another house and keep growing that way or find a venue; you then are no longer a house church. We started in a house but then grew and used other available buildings. We started wanting to be organic when in the house but then had to be more organised when we moved into a building because of growth.
2. We had problems with neighbours complaining we were using our home as a church and had to fend off our local district council. So, a practical element is to make sure you are on good terms with neighbours as they can cause problems. Also helps to be on good terms with local councillors and council officers and so forth. Also other church leaders. (Sign up to any Churches Together or similar groups.)
3. You need a house that is big enough to gather people and have room for children to do things on a Sunday when you meet.
4. Because we were in a village we encouraged people to walk. Parking is another practical issue.
5. Do you want charitable status? This leads onto gift aid. Whether or not you register as a charity you will need a name and a bank account.
6. You need to consider insurance. Public liability.
7. A house with a reasonable garden is also useful for meals etc and gathering for BBQs
8. One advantage of being a house church is that it is easier to be church than to do church.
9. Access to a large TV screen is also helpful
10. Keep instruments used for worship to a minimum - do NOT use amplifiers
11. We did not use a screen for the words of songs to start with we compiled a book with about 50 songs in it. (Alphabetical order). Later we produced a weekly song sheet as new songs came along
12. Accountability if taking an offering or receiving donations. 2 people to check cash takings and sign them in a book. Simple book-keeping system should be in place.

The reader who is involved in the house church movement may have useful thoughts and suggestions on best practices; please write in with them.

Daryl Martin – October 2018

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