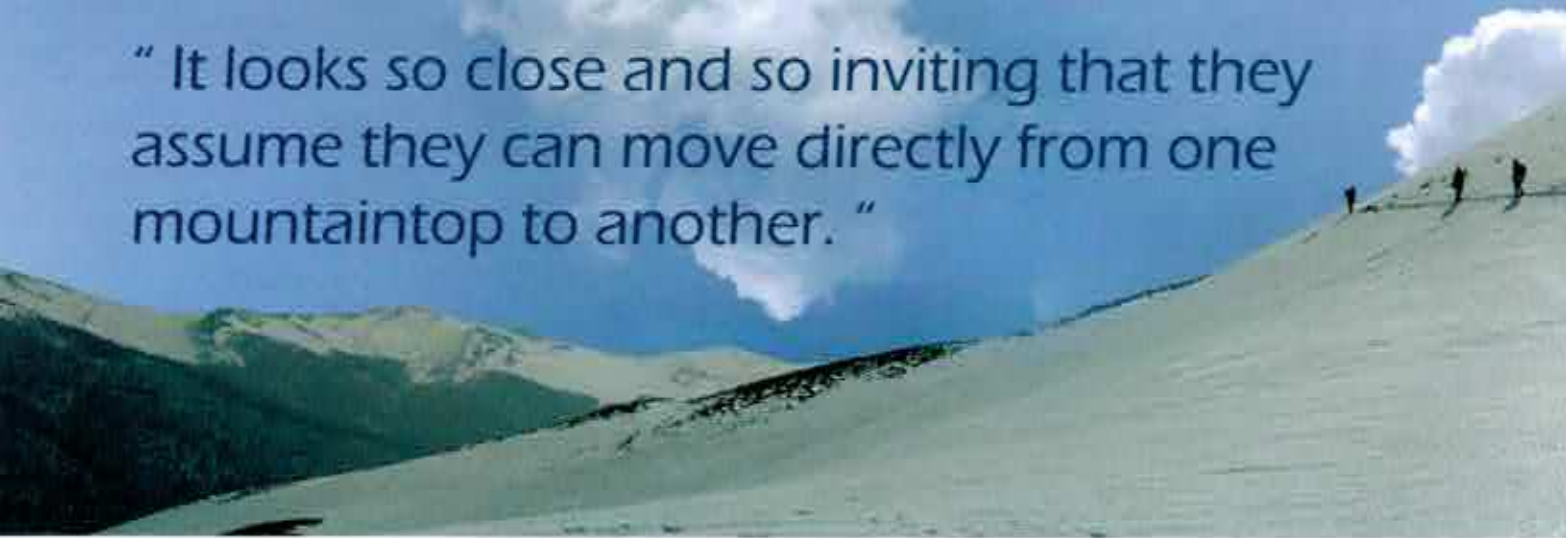


Is house church the answer? by Felix

“ It looks so close and so inviting that they assume they can move directly from one mountaintop to another. ”



The simple church movement is gaining momentum. Recent media attention, both secular and Christian, reinforces our understanding that we are part of a sociological phenomenon that is impacting our world.

As thrilling as this is, we must stop and recognize that there are some inherent dangers in approaching the tipping point.

We may soon receive reports that go something like this:

“I tried house church for a year. I bought the t-shirt, read the books, went to the conference, but it wasn't for me.”

“It didn't work—and besides, there was nothing for my kids. I'm going back to my old church.”

Are we misleading people when we say that this move of God through simple churches could be as big as the Reformation?

As people hop on the bandwagon of this latest fad hoping that this time, all their problems with church will be solved, they will bring their baggage with them. As they bring all of their expectations and wounds

into our homes, many will be disappointed.

Simple church is not a “feel good, goose bumps” movement. While home-based fellowships will be fresh and exciting at first, as people trade the formal sermons for informal meals, they will inevitably reach the point where they miss the programs that traditional church can offer. Simple churches just can't provide the professional quality of the large-scale worship, the teaching, and, of course, the kids' programs.

So what can we do to prepare for this potential disillusionment?

RECOGNIZE DEATH VALLEY

Wolfgang Simson describes what happens when Christians transition from traditional church to simple church. They can see the mountaintop of simple church from their position on the summit of the mountain of traditional, legacy church. It looks so close and so inviting that they assume they can move directly from one mountaintop to another. What they do not see is the unavoidable “death valley” between the two. Leaving the mountaintop of legacy church involves a dying process—dying to good things—the

diversity of the programs, the excellent teaching, the worship band, and the professional leadership. It takes time to learn to appreciate the informality of the 24/7 lifestyle of the house church, and to truly understand at a gut level that a church gathering really can be as simple as a group of people hanging out in His presence, hearing His voice and following His agenda for their time together.

This is not a sudden, painless death. It can be agonizingly slow, sometimes in terms of years, and the temptation to bail out of the process can be overwhelming. So some house churches may fail because we fail to press through “death valley.”

Cry out to God for fresh vision. Seek His face, begging Him to show you how a vibrant family of Jesus within geographical and cultural reaches of every person can transform a nation.

“HONEY, I SHRUNK THE CHURCH!”

Church is not based on where we meet. Although we have found that most of the core values of the New Testament church are easier to foster within a more intimate environment such as our homes, one of the biggest mistakes a simple



church can make is to merely swap the four walls of the church building for the four walls of the living room. As John White likes to say, all we can claim is, "Honey, I shrunk the church!" Someone has been asked to lead the worship, and another has been asked to teach. We are holding church, as we have always known it, in our living rooms, and doing it badly! The single guitarist does not get the chords right. There is no one to prepare an intellect-stretching teaching.

But a true simple church gathering is just that—simple. We are a community of Jesus lovers with the "naïve" belief that the Holy Spirit's agenda is more important than our own, and a willingness to press through to reach it. 1 Corinthians 14:26 describes our times together where each person's contribution is valued and important. Once we have tasted this on a regular basis, nothing else will satisfy.

LACK OF MISSIONAL DNA

Simple church is, above all, a change in DNA. It is a paradigm shift in how the church of Jesus Christ thinks and operates.

Neil Cole describes organic church DNA as:

Divine Truth
Nurturing Relationships
Apostolic Mission

If any of these are missing, a simple church will have challenges. The most likely of these core values to be absent is Apostolic Mission. If this is primarily a movement of people leaving the building to meet in small groups, then all we have seen is transfer growth, not true Kingdom expansion.

If a simple church does not have a deliberate outward focus, sooner or later it will become stagnant. For most of us, our difficulty is that all our friends are Christians. We effectively live in Christian ghettos of our own making. Our "third place," the place where we go to relax, where everyone knows our name, is church. But most unbelievers will not darken the doors of our legacy churches, and they simply do not know or understand what simple church is or how to get involved in one.

In the Gospels, Jesus told His disciples to go (Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 10:3). They were to cross the

culture barrier, to get out of their familiar environment, and to reach out to others with the Good News. To do this, we should see the simple church like melting a block of ice. Each person is encouraged to go out into their world to "be Jesus" to those around them, and like water, they will seep into every crack and crevice of society.

Jesus has a passion for the world, and we can ask Him to break our hearts with His heart for those around us who are lost and hurting.

The simple church movement is changing the landscape of Western Christianity. Let's make sure that it stays simple by hearing Jesus' voice and obeying Him.

Transition

Christians in the United States are moving towards house churches faster than any American religious movements of the past 250 years. Maurice Smith's article, which follows this editorial, is clear testimony to that. What is not yet clear is either the depth or the staying power of this movement. Are we watching trends that will lead to substantial changes in the American Christian landscape for generations to come, or are we witnessing a fad, yet another example of chasing "the next good thing" that we see the Lord doing.

Only time will tell. But we are part of this movement and thus we have a role in determining its outcome. Hebrews 4:2 tells us, "But the word that they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it." The fact that God has spoken, that He is moving, does not make the outcome inevitable. We must do our share of the work. This is the mystery of His sovereignty mixed with our free will.

History teaches us some very interesting lessons. 1 Corinthians 10:11 says, regarding the Old Testament story, that "all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition." Surely the same is true in learning through more recent examples of God's Spirit moving upon His people. Within my lifetime we can clearly document that such powerful moves of God as the waves of charismatic renewal since the '60's, the so-called "faith and word" movements of the '70's, and the incredible growth worldwide of church planting movements over the past 25 years, usually focused around multiplication of simple expressions of church life.

Do these movements lead us to conclude that ongoing transformation is automatic or inevitable? On the contrary, my experience in the 1970's church planting movement in England convinced me that we can be in the center of a move of God and still miss the long-term benefits because we stop pursuing Him.

The articles in this edition of House2House magazine all reflect the reality of the current transitions going on in North American churches. We know that "unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" (Psalm 127:1). But He chooses to use living stones. Our response is a part of both the mix and of the end result. Our attitudes, our character, our passions all become a part of the house that the Lord is building. Look at the article on Chinese church life to see the impact they feel prayer and fasting has on their continued growth.

It is a privilege to be involved in any move of God including what is happening with simple churches in North America right now. Let's not take that privilege for granted. But let's also exercise our faith so that this movement does not leave us like those Old Testament saints who, because of their lack of faith, were not profited by what they heard (Heb. 4:2). It may just be that whether we are currently experiencing a period of renewal, or whether this is to be a true time of reformation and transformation within the church, is up to us! As Barna reflects in the next article, leadership in war is done by generals. My question concerns the character of these generals. We need those, who like the Lion of Judah, are ready to serve by laying down their lives.

Tony Dale

AN INTERVIEW WITH TWO MEN CONNECTED WITH THE PERSECUTED CHURCH IN CHINA.

Q: How much do the people fast and pray in the house churches of China?

Bro Ren: Let us take prayer first. The leaders of the church in China try to pray three to four hours a day. That is normal. But then there are some brethren who are totally committed to pray. Almost every minute they are awake, they are praying.

Bro Paul: I know a brother who never sleeps more than two hours a night. He prays for 22 hours a day. The brothers and sisters pray always, and there are many all-night prayer vigils. I have been to some of these prayer meetings. By morning, the floor is slippery because of all the tears that flow during prayer.

Q: What about fasting? What part does fasting play in all these testimonies we have heard?

Bro Ren: There are two kinds of fasting in China. Most of the pastors have to fast because they don't have money to buy food. It is a natural part of their lives. The other kind of fasting is out of a burden for someone or some spiritual issue.

The first time we sent about twenty people out to preach, nineteen of them were arrested; one came back to report. Everyone else was detained for six months. We sent another group. The same thing happened. One lady came home on a stretcher. They smashed her skull. She was paralyzed, but later God restored her. When there is resistance like this in one specific location, then the whole team fasts and prays. Usually this kind of fasting will break the yoke within thirty days, and then the Gospel has free course.

Q: What does the Chinese church believe about the Book of Acts?

Bro Paul: They would say, "We are there. It is our normal Christian life." They believe that Acts is a demonstration of the normal Christian life. It is a testimony of the

resurrected Christ, and He is still the same today. They do not believe that miracles have passed away.

Bro Ren: We have to understand that the Gospel that is preached in China is a little bit different. The emphasis is not only intellectual and mental messages. It is fifty percent preaching, fifty percent showing the power of the Gospel. There is always an expectation and readiness for miracles. It is normal that any time the message of the Gospel is pronounced, there is a demonstration of the power of God in that situation. People can see clearly that Jesus is the Son of God, and that He is the Savior of the world. The church of China is not praying for miracles, but they are living in miracles.

Q: How do our Chinese brothers live out the Great Commission?

Bro Paul: They believe there is only one reason why God has left them here on earth: that is to evangelize the lost. Anyone who is not actively pursuing this holy purpose is missing the mark. The Great Commission cannot be compromised. Their methods are anointed preaching with signs following. The leaders instruct the evangelism teams to go to a new village and inquire about the worst problem in the village. Then they are to go and minister to that problem and show that Jesus is the all-powerful Savior. With this success, they turn to the people and preach Jesus to them.

Denny Kenaston
The Remnant Magazine

For the entire interview, use the following link.
The article can be found under January/February 2003:
www.charityministries.org/theremnant/theremnant-textonly.cfm



Radical Chinese House Churches