

WOLFGANG SIMSON

HOUSE CHURCH

THE

BOOK

Rediscover the Dynamic, Organic, Relational, Viral Community Jesus Started

BARNA 

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The House Church Book: Rediscover the Dynamic, Organic, Relational, Viral Community Jesus Started

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There are three movements to which I dedicate this book:

The revolution, led by people who, inspired by the Kingdom, start fresh fires and are bringing the presence of Christ where the church currently is not—and rightly doing so without asking anyone's permission other than the King's. Do something unheard of for your King, but remember, church history did not start with you.

The reformation, led by people who find themselves within existing church and mission structures. You have heard from the same Holy Spirit that it is absolutely time to press on, rediscover fascinating aspects of a vital church that you never knew, and intentionally align yourselves with the Kingdom, no matter where you started your journey. Some of your heritages are pure gold, others may need to fade away; so pass on the divine legacy and walk together with the revolutionaries, hand in hand.

The retirement, led by people who don't fit into either of the two groups above. Maybe you long ago stopped asking questions and simply do what you do because that's the way it's always been done. But what if God is not finished with you? What if there is still an unsung song in you, an unfinished job waiting for you, an orphaned generation that remains unparented without you? What would happen if you asked God for His strength to help you fly like an eagle once more and add your wisdom to the two movements above?

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It is exciting to meet someone who is both a solid thinker and a fearless follower of Christ. Wolfgang Simson is such a person. And the book you are holding in your hands is further evidence of both of those qualities.

It's not often that you get a book whose cost can be justified by the content in the pages before you even get to the introduction! *The House Church Book* is one of those unusual resources. I found the "15 Theses toward a Re-Incarnation of Church" to be such a section. I suppose you could consider the bulk of the book a bonus. No matter how you look at it, Wolfgang has provided us with an outstanding resource that, like his earlier book (*Houses That Change the World*), pushes us to rethink some of our foundational assumptions about who we are in Christ and what it means to be part of the body of Christ.

This is a book that will either excite you or disturb you—or maybe both. Wolfgang is a provocateur with a heart dedicated to Jesus. As such, he does not settle for simplistic blather. Consequently, he has written a book that implores us to think about the church in terms of faith rather than formulas, people rather than programs and professionals,

biblical principles rather than cultural pragmatism, humility rather than hubris, and simplicity rather than superficiality. Even if you cheer everything he describes and prescribes, you should also find yourself uncomfortable given the state of the church today. It is my prayer that such an emotion is a holy discomfort in which God's Spirit is nudging you to new realizations that enable you to be a healthy contributor to His ever-developing church.

Wolfgang's work is hopeful and honest. It is also aggressive in its pursuit of biblical authenticity. Toward that end, this new work describes various components of the house church movement—its scriptural basis, advantages, dangers, challenges, and opportunities. If you read the book with an open mind, I think you will find it to be a volume that is biblically sound, culturally relevant, and individually challenging.

Why do I encourage you to retain an “open mind” while reading *The House Church Book*? Because so many people these days seem to be closed minded about the revolution of faith and form that we are experiencing around us. Wolfgang helps us to understand the history of the church, its practices and structure, and its implications for individuals, families, and communities. He calls us back to the biblical commands for the family to be a center of faith development and practice, the deployment of our God-given gifts, and the experience of growth through genuine spiritual community.

Who wouldn't want to participate in and benefit from these things? But how many of us are able to hear a message that invites us to reexamine our current practices and

assumptions in order to experience the best that God has for us and His Kingdom?

I am grateful to Wolfgang for his single-minded pursuit of God and truth, and for the fruit of that journey that appears on these pages. May you find this book to be every bit as stimulating, upsetting, uplifting, insightful, and freeing as I have.

George Barna
Ventura, California
April 2009

A Vision Too Good to Be True?

Being brought up in “Christian” Germany with churches everywhere, I always felt that there must be something exciting about the community that Jesus started in the New Testament—but somehow I could never discover what that was. Together with many friends and colleagues, I dreamed of a community that would be as simple as one–two–three, yet would also be dynamic, explosive, and able to turn a neighborhood and the world upside down. We saw the church as a supernatural invention, endowed with God’s gift of immortality—a means to disciple each other, and to make the life of Jesus rub off on each other. We saw it as an experience of grace and grapes, love and laughter, joy and jellybeans, forgiveness and fun, power and—yes, why not?—paper. Notes, books, sheets—we knew that could not be all there is to church.

We dreamed of a church that wouldn’t need huge amounts of money, or rhetoric, or control, or manipulation. A church that was nonreligious at heart, thrilled people to the core, and made them lose their tongues out of sheer joy and astonishment. A church that would simply teach us The Way to live. A church that not only had a message, *but was the message*.

We knew a church like this could spread like an

unstoppable virus, infecting whatever it touched, and ultimately covering the earth with the glory and knowledge of God. This church's power would stem from its inventor and be equipped with the most ingenious spiritual genetic code, a sort of heavenly DNA, which would enable it to transfer Kingdom values from heaven to earth and to reproduce them here. In the process it would transform not only water into wine, but atheists into apostles, policewomen into prophetesses, terrorists into teachers, electricians into evangelists, and plumbers into pastors.

The church we dreamed of would be like a spiritual extended family—organic, not organized; relational, not formal. It would have a persecution-proof structure. It would mature under tears, multiply under pressure, and breathe under water. It would flourish in the desert, see in the darkness, and thrive in the midst of chaos. A church like this would multiply like five loaves and two fish in the hands of Jesus, and its people would become its resources, with one name to boast about, the Lamb of God.

15 Theses toward a Re-Incarnation of Church

I believe that God is changing the church today, which in turn will change the world. Millions of Christians around the world are already aware of an imminent reformation of global proportions. They are saying, in effect: “Church as we know it is preventing church as God wants it.” There is a new collective awareness of an age-old revelation, a corporate spiritual echo. In the following 15 theses I will summarize a part of this reformation of the church, and I am convinced that these ideas reflect a part of what the Spirit of God is saying to the church today. For some, this information might be the proverbial fist-sized cloud in Elijah’s sky. Others already feel the pouring rain.

1. Christianity is a way of life, not a series of religious meetings.

Before they were called Christians, followers of Christ were called “The Way.” One of the reasons for this title was that these believers had literally found the way to live. The nature of church is not reflected in a constant series of religious meetings led by professional clergy in holy places especially reserved to experience Jesus. Rather, it is mirrored in the prophetic way followers of Christ live

their everyday lives in spiritual extended families, as vivid answers to the questions that society asks, and in the place where it counts most—in their homes.

2. Time to change the “cathagogue system.”

The historic Orthodox and Catholic Church—that existed after Constantine in the fourth century—developed and adopted a religious system based on two elements: a Christian version of the Old Testament Temple—the cathedral—and a worship pattern styled after the Jewish synagogue. They thus adopted, as the foundational pattern for the times to follow, a blueprint for Christian meetings and worship that was neither expressly revealed, nor ever endorsed by God in New Testament times: the “cathagogue,” linking the house-of-God mentality and the synagogue. Baptized with the Greek pagan philosophy of separating the sacred from the secular, the cathagogue system became the black hole of Christianity, swallowing most of its society-transforming energies and inducing the church to become self-absorbed for centuries to come. The Roman Catholic Church went on to canonize the system. Luther reformed the theology surrounding the gospel, but left the outer forms of “church” remarkably untouched. The Free Churches freed the system from the state, the Baptists then baptized it, the Quakers dry-cleaned it, the Salvation Army put it in uniform, the Pentecostals anointed it, and the charismatics renewed it, but until today nobody has really changed the system. The time to do that has now arrived.

3. The third Reformation.

In rediscovering the gospel of salvation by faith and grace alone, Luther started to reform the church through reforming theology. In the seventeenth century, through movements in the pietistic renewal, Christians recovered a new intimacy with God, which led to a reformation of spirituality, the second reformation. Now God is touching the wineskins, initiating a third reformation, a reformation of structure.

4. From church houses to house churches.

From the time of the New Testament there has been no such thing as “a house of God.” At the cost of his life, Stephen reminded us that God does not live in temples made by human hands. The church is the people of God. The church, therefore, was and is at home where people are at home: in ordinary houses. There the people of God share their lives in the power of the Holy Spirit and have “meat-ings,” i.e., they eat when they meet. They often do not even hesitate to sell private property and share material and spiritual blessings; they teach each other in real-life situations how to obey God’s Word—not with professorial lectures, but dynamically, with dialogue and questions and answers. There they pray and prophesy with each other and baptize one another. There they can let their masks drop and confess their sins, regaining a new corporate identity through love, acceptance, and forgiveness.

5. The church has to become small in order to grow large.

The New Testament church was made up of small groups,

typically between ten and fifteen people. It grew, but not by forming big congregations of three hundred people who filled cathedrals and lost fellowship. Instead it multiplied “sideways,” dividing like organic cells once these groups reached around fifteen or twenty people. This then made it possible for all the Christians to get together in citywide celebrations, as in Solomon’s Temple Colonnade in Jerusalem. The traditional congregational church is by comparison a sad compromise. Most churches of today are simply too big to provide real fellowship. They have too often become “fellowships without fellowship.”

6. A church is led by more than a pastor.

The local church is not led by a pastor, but fathered by an elder, a man of wisdom who is engaged with reality. The local house churches are then networked into a movement by the combination of elders and members of the so-called fivefold ministries (apostles, prophets, pastors, evangelists, and teachers) circulating from house to house, like blood circulating in a human body. The apostolic and prophetic ministries play a special foundational role (Ephesians 2:20; 4:11-12). A pastor (shepherd) is an important member of the whole team, but he cannot fulfill more than part of the task of equipping the saints for the ministry. He has to be complemented synergistically by the other four ministries in order to function properly.

7. The right pieces—fit together in the wrong way.

To do a jigsaw puzzle, we have to put the pieces together according to the original pattern, otherwise the individual

pieces do not make any sense and the whole picture turns out wrong. In the Christian world, we have all the right pieces, but we have fit them together in the wrong way because of fear, tradition, religious jealousy, and a power-and-control mentality. Just as water is found in three forms—ice, liquid, and steam—so, too, the five ministries mentioned in Ephesians 4:11-12—the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—are found today, but not always in the right forms and in the right places. They are either frozen ice in the rigid system of institutionalized Christianity, exist as clear liquid, or vanish like steam into the thin air of free-flying ministries and “independent” churches accountable to no one. Just as it is best to hydrate plants and flowers with the liquid version of water, so these five equipping ministries will have to be transformed back into new—and at the same time, age-old—forms, so that the whole spiritual organism can flourish and the individual “ministers” can find their proper role and place in the whole.

8. Out of the hands of bureaucratic clergy and on toward the priesthood of all believers.

According to the New Testament, “there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). God simply does not want religious professionals to force themselves between Himself and His people. The veil is torn, and God allows people to access Himself directly through Jesus Christ, the only Way. No expression of a New Testament church was ever led by just

one professional “holy man” doing the business of communicating with God and then feeding some relatively passive, religious consumers, Moses-style. Christianity has adopted this method from pagan religions, or at best from the Old Testament.

The heavy professionalization of the church since Constantine has been a pervasive influence long enough, dividing the people of God artificially into an infantilized laity and a professional clergy, and developing power-based mentalities and pyramid structures.

To enable the priesthood of all believers, the present system will have to change completely. Bureaucracy is the most dubious of all administrative systems because it basically allows only yes or no answers. There is no room for spontaneity and humanity, no room for real life. This may be all right in politics and business, but not the church. Today God seems to be in the business of delivering His church from a Babylonian-like captivity of religious bureaucrats and controlling spirits and bringing it into the public domain. He is putting it into the hands of ordinary people whom God has made extraordinary and who, as in the old days, may still smell of fish, perfume, or revolution.

9. Return from organized to organic forms of Christianity.

The body of Christ is a vivid description of an organic being, not an organized mechanism. At the local level, church consists of a multitude of extended spiritual families, which are organically related to each other as a network. The way these communities function together is an

integral part of the message of the whole body. What has become a maximum of organization with a minimum of organism, has to be changed into a minimum of organization to allow a maximum of organism. Like a straitjacket, too much organization has the potential of restricting and choking the organism simply out of fear that something might go wrong. Fear is the opposite of faith—not exactly a Christian virtue. Fear wants to control; faith can trust. God has entrusted the body of Christ into the hands of stewardship-minded people who believe that He is still in control even if they are not. Today we need to develop regional and national networks based on trust if we want to see organic forms of Christianity reemerge.

10. From worshipping our worship to worshipping God.

The image of much of contemporary Christianity could be described as holy people coming regularly to a holy place on a holy day at a holy hour to participate in a holy ritual led by a holy man dressed in holy clothes for a holy fee. Since this regular performance-oriented enterprise, called a “worship service,” requires a lot of organizational talent and administrative bureaucracy, formalized and institutionalized patterns develop quickly into rigid traditions. Statistically, a traditional one- or two-hour worship service is very resource-hungry but produces very little fruit in terms of discipling people and changing lives. Economically, it is a high-input, low-output structure. Traditionally, the desire to worship “in the right way” has led to denominationalism, confessionalism, and nominalism. This ignores the fact

that Christians are called to worship “in spirit and in truth” rather than in cathedrals holding songbooks. It also ignores the fact that most of life is informal, and so, too, is Christianity as “the Way of Life.” We need to change from being powerful actors to people who act powerfully.

11. Stop bringing people to church, and start bringing the church to the people.

The church is moving from being a come-structure to being a go-structure. As a result, Christians need to stop trying to bring people to church, and start bringing the church to the people. The mission of the church will never be accomplished just by adding to the existing structure. It will take nothing less than a mushrooming of the church through spontaneous multiplication into areas of the world where Christ is not yet known.

12. Rediscovering the Lord’s Supper as a real supper with real food.

Church tradition has managed to celebrate the Lord’s Supper in a homeopathic and deeply religious form, characteristically with a few drops of wine, a tasteless cookie, and a sad face. However, the Lord’s Supper was actually more a substantial supper with a symbolic meaning than a symbolic supper with a substantial meaning. God is restoring eating back into our meetings.

13. From denominations to the city church.

Jesus called us to a universal movement, and what resulted instead was a series of religious corporations with global chains marketing their special brands of Christianity and

competing with each other. Through this branding of Christianity, most of Protestantism has lost its voice in the world and become politically insignificant—more concerned with traditional distinctives and religious infighting than with developing a collective testimony before the world. Jesus simply never asked people to organize themselves into factions and denominations, and Paul even spoke of it as “worldly,” a sign of baby Christians.

In the early days of the church, Christians had a dual identity: They were truly His church, vertically belonging to God. They then organized themselves according to geography, relating horizontally to each other on earth as well. This means that not only should Christian neighbors organize themselves into neighborhood or house churches where they share their lives locally, they should also come together as a collective identity as much as they can to express the unity of the city church, in citywide or regional celebrations expressing the corporate nature of the church. Authenticity in the neighborhoods connected with a regional or citywide corporate identity will make the church not only politically significant and spiritually convincing, but it will also allow a return to the biblical model of the city church, the sum total of all born-again Christians of a city or an area.

14. Developing a persecution-proof spirit.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted,” Jesus said in Matthew 5:10. Unfortunately, contemporary Christianity is often too harmless and polite to be worth persecuting.

Many of Christ's followers today are more into titles, medals, and social respectability—or worse, they remain silent and are not worth being noticed at all—to be targets of persecution. But as Christians again begin to live out New Testament standards of life, the natural reaction of the world will be as it always has been: conversion or persecution. Instead of nesting comfortably in temporary zones of religious liberty, Christians can expect to again be called out as the main culprits standing in the way of global humanism. That is why Christians will and must feel the “repressive tolerance” of a world that has lost its absolutes and therefore refuses to recognize and obey its creator God with His absolute standards. Coupled with the growing privatization and spiritualization of politics and economics, Christians will—sooner than most think—have their chance to stand happily accused in the company of Jesus. We need to prepare now for the future by developing a persecution-proof spirit and an even more persecution-proof structure.

15. The church comes home.

Where is the easiest place for people to be outwardly spiritual? Is it, perhaps, hiding behind a big pulpit, dressed in holy robes, preaching holy words to a faceless crowd, and then disappearing into an office? And where is the most difficult—and therefore most meaningful—place to be spiritual? At home, in the presence of our spouses and children, where everything we do and say is automatically put through a spiritual litmus test against reality, where hypocrisy can be effectively weeded out and authenticity

can grow. Much of Christianity has fled the family and instead organized artificial performances in sacred buildings far from the atmosphere of real life. As God is in the business of recapturing the homes, the church turns back to its roots—back to where it came from. It literally comes home, completing the circle of church history at the end of world history.

As Christians of all walks of life, from all denominations and backgrounds, feel a clear echo in their spirit to what God is saying to the church and start to hear globally in order to act locally, they begin to function again as one body. They stop asking God to bless what they are doing, and start doing what God is blessing. They organize themselves into neighborhood house churches and meet in regional or city celebrations. You are invited to become part of this movement and make your own contribution. Maybe your home, too, will become a house that changes the world.

People with Principles, Not Methods

Jesus has given us the commission to go and make disciples of all nations, and it is the growing conviction of many Christians around the world that this will only ever be achieved by having a church within walking distance of every person on the globe. The church, the secret and powerful society of the redeemed, must again become the place where people can literally see the body of Christ and where His glory is revealed in the most practical terms: hands-on, down to earth, right next door, unable to be overlooked or ignored, living among us every day.

This book focuses on the question: what type of church will it take to be just that? Pragmatism is not really a virtue of God. I have therefore resisted the temptation of describing a multitude of models that could be used as blueprints for house-church planting. Neither have I set out “six easy steps to start a house-church movement,” because it is neither easy nor advisable to take formulas and existing models and try to photocopy them. I simply do not believe in the copycat mentality. For one reason, it is more important for spiritually significant *principles* to sink in and be grasped than for a five-step outline to be copied and followed. Instead of importing other people’s spiritual success

stories, I would find it more natural for us all to search for the ways that God has ordained for each one of us to put into practice in our own time and place what we feel He has revealed to us. I do not want to spare any one of us this creative tension.

A second reason I do not believe in the copycat mentality is that many are looking for a proven truth, a foolproof method and model before they take a leap of faith and go and do likewise. Although this play-it-safe mentality sounds very reasonable, I believe it is a spiritual way of hiding fear: we might leap, but it won't really be out of faith. The core followers of Christ have found that following Him is not about having sufficient academic and statistical proof before they act; rather, it is about having the faithful and obedient desire to follow God's Word and do what He said, no matter what, when, where, or who has gone before.

Some, when they hear the term *house church*, think of a Chinese church model. Let me therefore make clear for readers in Western countries that house churches have never been an exotic foreign model of church, and will not be a strange new foreign import. After all, the first church to be planted in the West was started in the home of Lydia in Philippi, Macedonia. It was a house church. House churches are a good old European tradition. After the Greek and Roman house churches of the first two centuries and many sporadic "lay-led" movements after the time of Constantine, it was the Celtic movement that first evangelized Europe, even before Patrick, Columba, Gallus, or Boniface were alive. The Celts (or *Galli*, as they were known in Latin) were the same race as the Gauls, who invaded Rome

around 280 BC, many of whom then settled down in Asia Minor, or Galatia, the area to which Paul directed his letter. The holistic concept of early Celtic Christianity is very close to New Testament (Galatian) house churches as I describe them here.

Organic house churches have therefore been an early part of European history and are not at all foreign or new. The fact is that between the sixth and ninth centuries, the Celtic movement was almost completely assimilated into the Catholic church—including the structures that go with it. I believe this is one of the bigger tragedies of European church history. Even today, almost all contemporary church plants in the West go through an organic house-church phase in their early days. Many western Christians still look back with fond memories at the spontaneous early months or the “good old times when we still had our church in homes.” The problem is not so much that there are no house churches in the West, but that this form of church has neither been consciously acknowledged nor actively pursued.

This book is intended to inspire, encourage, and celebrate those Christians who will be God’s instruments for gathering the harvest in this latest leg of history. As many prophets tell us, it will be a generation of somebodies and nobodies, people with or without titles, who will lead God’s movement on earth to fulfill its calling. They will do it under all sorts of conditions: in the midst of persecution or celebrated in talk shows, under unspeakable difficulties or walking on red carpets. They may be despised or adored, ridiculed or consulted, cheated or honored, scorned or quoted, tortured or pampered, unknown

or known. In other words, this book is a battle cry for ordinary followers of Christ who will be made extraordinary in purpose and power to flood this earth with house churches. And through their humble, self-denying, and obedient lives, the presence, knowledge, and glory of Christ will spread as the waters that cover the sea.

The Reinvention of Church

Discovering a church we never knew

In a research project in Amsterdam in the early 1990s, young people were asked if they were interested in God. One hundred percent of them answered yes. Then they were asked whether they were interested in church: one percent said yes, 99 percent said no.¹ Most pastors who heard this story assumed that something must be seriously wrong with the youth of Amsterdam since everything is right with the church. Today I reluctantly have to admit that it is probably the other way around. Maybe the youth of Amsterdam have some lessons to teach the church that we have been unwilling to learn. Maybe we have fallen so in love with our own traditions that we are almost unable to truly hear and feel the world from our safe and “holy” distance.

Imagine a young boy unwrapping a new puzzle and immediately trying to put the pieces together. Out of the puzzle box

he pulls a picture of a red race car. (He loves red race cars!) Excited, he tries to assemble the pieces according to the picture. But somehow the pieces do not seem to fit as they should. He tries to make them fit better by bending them or tearing off an edge here and there, but something is still not right. Finally his father comes to the rescue. Dad takes the picture of the red race car and turns it over. Lo and behold, on the other side is a picture of a beautiful tree, the “original” picture depicted in the puzzle. The race car is only an advertisement for another puzzle made by the same company! The boy sighs with relief and starts to put the pieces together according to the new original; within minutes it is done. What was wrong before? He had all the right pieces, but the wrong original. He had unquestionable and honest motives, but quite simply the wrong blueprint.

Is this the situation of a large part of Christendom today? We have all the right pieces: the Word of God, people, houses, prayer, motivation, money. But could it be that we are putting them all together according to a wrong original—our very own beloved red race car? Has the unthinkable happened? Has someone cunningly slipped us an impractical blueprint? Do we stand transfixed in front of our spiritual photocopiers (Bible colleges, publishing houses, seminaries, or leadership programs), continuing to hit that green button in an effort to make copies of what we are convinced is a biblical, canonized, unquestionable, firsthand original? I can imagine that Satan, the enemy of the church, has no problem with even the most fervent evangelistic mission activities or programs, as long as they are all about making copies of red race cars—our

traditional pattern of church that makes no serious threat to his claims on humankind.

Maybe the time has come for us to stop bending pieces and tearing them apart in an effort to make them match our picture of what the church should be and instead allow God to recreate church in all of us. It might start with us reexamining our blueprints and turning over our originals.

The Shift from Organized to Organic Church

As any family get-together proves, we can accomplish the goal of fellowship without the need for heavy structure. Families can get along quite well without a master of ceremonies, a word of introduction, a special song, a sermon by Father, and a vote of thanks by Mother. These formalities happen at weddings and on other occasions, but not in everyday life. Church, however, is not to be an artificial performance; it is for everyday life, because it is a way of life.

Within each culture, there is a very important numerical line between the organic and the organized, the informal and the formal, the spontaneous and the liturgical. I call this the *twenty-barrier*, because in many cultures twenty is the maximum number of people in a group that still feels like “family.” Groups of this size and smaller still feel organic and informal, without the need to become formal or organized.

Organisms are structured too, and I am not advocating a total absence of order and structure. But unlike an organized series of meetings that are typically structured from outside, organisms are usually structured from within. The

nature of a meeting defines and therefore limits the size of a meeting. If it's two families getting together to pray, it's going to be smaller than if it's a neighborhood group getting together to do Bible study. If we cross the twenty-barrier, the group stops being organic and starts to become formal, even feeling the need to follow a set agenda. Effectiveness in relationship and mutual communication goes down, and the need for someone to coach and lead the meeting goes up. As a result the house church changes its values and starts to develop totally different dynamics. It often simply stops being independent, spontaneous, and lively, and instead needs to be “run,” organized, and visibly led into a new and organized life-form—if there is such a thing. Though still alive, the original organism becomes trapped in a formal structure that chokes it, conditions it, and ultimately prevents relational and spontaneous fellowship in the name of organized fellowship.

Biblical *koinōnia* means fellowship, sharing, giving generously, and participating with someone. In its original, organic form *koinōnia* is highly contagious and able to reproduce like a virus, as we shall see. One of the fatal aspects of crossing the twenty-barrier is that the original organic form of fellowship usually loses its internal reproduction potential. When the church's internal potential for growth is ignored or overruled, it can only be cloned, manufactured, or mass-produced. Church history proves that organized religion is only one swift step away from institutionalism and fossilization.

One of the most important decisions in terms of the

structure and future of a church, therefore, is what to do when person number twenty-one walks through the door. Structurally, that additional person brings the church into the red zone. You can either continue growing upward by becoming organized, and losing your house-church dynamics, or you can divide the house church into two or three units and multiply it, thus growing sideways.

Creation itself teaches us that at some point healthy organisms stop growing and start multiplying. Bigger is not necessarily better or more beautiful. Could it be that, although it is perfectly okay to expect a church to grow, we are generally looking for that growth in the wrong direction? We are often intrigued by those well-publicized and quite exceptional stories of megachurches, but we tend to overlook the fact that these types of churches are usually extraordinary exceptions, due to extraordinary leaders and circumstances.

Has all that talk about “big is beautiful” tricked our thinking? If so, we may have to change our mind-set to realize that an average church would then be just eight, ten, or twelve people; a large church, fifteen; and a “megachurch” would include not thousands of attendees, but twenty-one or twenty-two.

Perhaps then, the average “small church” of twenty-five or forty-five people—one that is trying to rent a hall or sanction a building fund or is still saving for an overhead projector—is not at all too small, but rather, already *far too big*. The church members probably crossed the organism–organization line long ago, not realizing that they have become quite heavy and

inflexible, structurally bloated and deformed. While they're trying to grow up like all those other churches, they're only inching forward because of the relentless activities of a busy pastor or leader with his coworkers.

Worldwide, the average size of churches is around one hundred people. Only a very small percentage of churches become bigger than two hundred, and many are in the forty to sixty bracket. The *average* Sunday morning attendance of the Lutheran churches in Germany, for example, is currently far less than twenty people.²

For many churches it could be quite liberating to be allowed to become what many of them already are: slightly overgrown house churches struggling with their own size and the unspoken blueprint they are trying to follow. Would it not be much more practical for them to head the other way and “grow down” rather than striving to grow up?

The well-known theologian Elton Trueblood once said, “The church must be smaller before it can be substantially stronger.”³ I agree. But if we take this idea one step further, the church will also have to become much smaller before it can become substantially bigger. Statistically, the church will have to shrink in order to grow.

Classical church growth terminology differentiates between three levels of church: cell, congregation, and celebration. I would like to explain briefly what these terms mean.

The *cell* is typically house based and sociologically small, between three and twenty people. Its purpose is relational fellowship, and its functions are mostly organic, i.e., members

are often in direct contact with each other and therefore a natural part of one another's lives.

The *congregation* (or cluster) is sociologically medium in size, usually between twenty and two hundred people. It functions more formally, is organized, often has a pastor, and includes a worship service and various programs. Most congregations function in a sanctuary or a building specially used for religious purposes. Members do not have direct or natural contacts with each other because the meeting is often too large or not structured to allow for that.

The *celebration* is typically a large gathering of two hundred or more Christians from an area, expressing their unity in Christ, celebrating what God has done and will do for them, and anticipating Christ's return. It is usually led by Christians with apostolic and prophetic ministries. Celebrations can happen in the open air, in stadiums, conference centers, or any other large area. People have no way of being in direct contact with all who are present, and are happily "lost in the crowd." In many places in history, the cathedral model of church has tried, and sometimes successfully managed, to fulfill this citywide function.

The Small and the Large

In the Bible we find two of these levels, the cell and the celebration. In the New Testament, the church sometimes gathered in large groups in places like Solomon's Temple Colonnade or simply in the open air. But more commonly, Christians got together in cell-sized units—the house-based church. Once

the Jerusalem Temple was declared out of bounds for followers of The Way, believers continued to meet in homes. When the celebration was not possible, the cell lived on.

In order to bring out some of the differences between the congregational churches and the New Testament house churches, consider this selective list of key areas in which they differ.

NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH	CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
moving from house to house	meeting in sanctuaries
apostles, prophets	pastors, teachers
elders	evangelists
sharing all they had	tithing
community lifestyle	individual
natural discipling of neighbors; multiplying itself	outreach, action, programs, specialists
getting the church into people's homes	getting people into the church
small, intimate groups	large, impersonal groups
kinetic, discussion based	static, sermon centered
"Go and make disciples!"	"Come and become a member!"
equipping oriented	performance oriented
church sending itself as a multipliable unit	church sending specialized missionaries

A Wedding a Week

Life in any culture has two aspects, everyday living and special events. Both aspects of life have their own valid ways of expression. Everyday life is usually expressed within the family, the basic cell unit of every society and culture. Families are usually very organic, informal, and relational. Special

events are extraordinary functions for which everyone duly prepares—weddings, festivals, funerals, and traditional celebrations. They are usually formal, need much organization, and are often highly structured.

Imagine if you had to attend a wedding every weekend. Each wedding followed the same basic pattern, had the same bridegroom and bride, and even included the same kind of food. After some weeks the excitement would wear off. You would know what to expect, and you would know what was going to happen next. The wedding would still remain a nice thing, a beautiful tradition, but it would feel odd to have the same type of festival every week.

We need to be careful not to do this with church. Jesus has shown us not only a way to celebrate, but also a way to live. Both aspects are necessary and both are good. But everyday life is not like a wedding, as any married couple will attest. If church takes on only celebration structures, it will be like celebrating a wedding a week, and our behavior will soon be so far removed from real life that it will cease to make sense to ordinary people. It will become an artificial, weekly performance. If church is a God-given way of community life, and if life takes place in the basic unit of a family, there is nothing more appropriate than for the church to be based in simple, ordinary, everyday homes. House churches are not only a way for us to express community; they are also one of God's means to achieve community.

I see at least twelve advantages of a house-church movement over a traditional congregational-style church.

1. Discipled multiplication

House church is centered on multiplication and discipleship, and it has huge growth potential because the “cell” is the multipliable unit itself. Mentoring, multiplication, and discipleship are at the heart of this concept. By definition, congregation is not a discipleship model because its structure tends to prevent mentoring. Discipleship was never really meant to be one to one; it is a function of community. Next to the Holy Spirit, peer pressure may be the strongest teacher on earth, as any parent of teenagers will agree. The house church allows for a redeemed use of peer pressure: living out a healthy and loving accountability with each other, learning new Kingdom values from each other, and helping each other to live out this new lifestyle. No one is left to handle individual and secret struggles alone, and each therefore quickly matures.

2. Persecution-proof structure

Through a small and flexible way of life, the house church can develop an almost persecution-proof spirit—or at least persecution-resistant—as opposed to the very visible and immovable traditional church with a cross on its steeple. We will discuss this important issue later at a deeper level.

3. Freedom from church growth barriers

Once careful attention is given to prevent an organic house church from becoming a structured organization, the house church can then be multiplied through mitosis, an organic cell-reproduction process, and the overall growth

of a movement is virtually free from church growth barriers, such as space limitations.

4. More efficient involvement of a higher percentage of people

Congregations are often program based. But programs have proven to be quite inefficient and resource hungry, usually involving an exhausted 20 percent of the church doing the work for the other, more passive, 80 percent. In a house church, almost everyone can be easily and naturally involved, and dead wood is cut out. Since involved people are fulfilled—and therefore happy—the overall quality and efficiency of the church grows.

5. A break from the pastoral care dilemma

The house-church model breaks the pastoral care dilemma, a known and self-defeating problem of the congregational church: as numbers grow, the pastoral quality usually goes down because the pastor can no longer tend all the sheep.

6. A place of life transformation and accountability

An analysis of the Western church shows that the congregational model is almost totally ineffective at changing basic values and lifestyles. Many Christians demonstrably end up with the same lifestyle of the not-yet-Christians around them, becoming indistinguishable from society and losing their prophetic edge. The house church provides a far more effective place for the radical transformation of values and the reordering of life, offering mutual and organic accountability (this was addressed under point 1).

7. A better place of growth for new Christians

Much has been written about the inward-looking mentality

of the congregational model, which has the church and its programs at the center, with everything else rotating around this hub. This structure is, statistically speaking, a most unfriendly zone for new Christians. In contrast, the house church is a more effective, natural, and welcoming zone for new people to come and stay in touch with the Christian community. It provides spiritual fathers and mothers, not just teachers and notebooks. It also reverses the general direction of the perspective of Christians: instead of getting people to church, it gets church to the people.

8. A solution for the leadership crisis

House churches are led by elders, and they are just that: older but not necessarily elderly. Elders do not have to be skilled masters of ceremonies or learned teachers; modest and authentic parents with obedient children will do nicely to start with. Rather than being seminary graduates, elders have passed the test of time and are living mature lives. Easy to find and develop, this kind of leadership depends on initial and ongoing apostolic and prophetic input and support, and leads to ministries that can be multiplied and grown exponentially. Traditional Sunday schools, Bible schools, and seminaries are mostly static, addition-based leadership development systems that grow, at best, linearly rather than exponentially. Because they are informational systems and not transformational systems, they cannot match a multiplying movement of house churches with an exponentially growing need for elders.

9. A way to eliminate the clergy-laity division

“Nowhere in the New Testament do we find references to a pastor leading a congregation,” says English church planter Barney Coombs in his book *Apostles Today*. The house church does not need a pastor in the traditional sense at all, because elders who are functioning together with the corporate giftedness of the house church maintain and multiply the life of the church. This therefore breaks the curse of the clergy-laity division, which the congregational system reinforces.

10. A biblically based pattern

We cannot afford to ignore biblical revelation for too long and expect to get away with it. Tradition is a strong teacher, but God’s Word is simply better and more reliable. Even in an age of postmodernism and relativity, the Bible still teaches absolutes. But it absolutely does not teach us that an event on Sundays, where a passive crowd watches a religious performance, is a New Testament church. God’s work done God’s way still attracts God’s blessing. Even in Old Testament times, God exhorted Moses to build the tabernacle and its components “according to the pattern” (Exodus 25:40). It is worth struggling even with our own trusted traditions for the purpose of regaining biblical truth, because it is not tradition that sets us free, but the truth of God’s Word.

11. A budget-conscious way of operating

The congregational system of church can be defined as “plot plus building plus pastor plus salary plus programs.”

The house church is “people plus ordinary houses plus faith plus shared life,” all of which is undeniably cheaper. As congregational churches cost enormous sums of money to establish, and more money to maintain and to propagate, the house church literally makes money, because it produces more than it consumes. In an age in which there seems to be an endless cry for more money for “the work of church,” we should not overlook alternatives but instead be good stewards of the financial talents that God gives us.

12. A resurrection of the city church

I see the present church organized into four levels, which is an expansion of the classic church growth model structure:

Level I: the house (where organic fellowship is possible, irrespective of what we call it)

Level II: the congregational church (the traditional meeting-oriented denominational church)

Level III: the city or region

Level IV: the denomination (the network, conference, or organization of denominational churches of an area)

The traditional church is typically focused on two levels—the congregational church and the denomination. The house church, however, allows us to regain a focus on the home and the community. The church in the New Testament was named according to its geographical location, not denomination. Similarly, with a new wave of house churches, this also opens up a way back to the “city

church”—all the Christians of a city or region meeting in citywide celebrations. Within the city church, a community’s most gifted Christians forget all titles and politics, and in a new maturity, sacrifice their own names, denominations, reputations, and single-handed successes to the sole advancement of the Kingdom of God. 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. What the devil has tried hard to prevent at any cost will again come true: “the Romans,” “the Ephesians,” “the Corinthians,” “the church of Jerusalem,” Vienna, Singapore, Baghdad, Khartoum, or Montevideo will reconnect with each other, becoming a supernatural corporate identity and movement under one single Lord and Master, and speaking with a collective and powerful voice.

What occurs at the small level of house churches will eventually spill over on a larger, citywide scale, where the church will excel at the small and therefore excel at the large. Rather than Christians who must be regularly motivated through speakers at top-down, topic-based conferences, the infectious joy and excitement at the house level will bubble up and express itself citywide, where no one can miss it, and people will again repeat the statement made first in Jerusalem: You have filled our city with your teaching! (Acts 5:28). If ever God should choose to repeat an instance such as the Pentecost, where one hundred

and twenty upper-room Christians suddenly face the challenge of accommodating three thousand converts in one day, the house church will be prepared, because the flexible structure of multiplying will already be in place.

In many areas of the world, local and regional pastoral fellowships and prayer networks are emerging. I believe this can be the beginning of a process—a Spirit-led, intuitive, and slow convergence of people with like-minded spirits—that creates healthy relationships first, and then leads to the formation of a collective spiritual identity. And then we face a new challenge: to jointly take on the task of discipling our cities and regions!

But before we proceed, let us first have a look at how something so beautiful could have been lost in history, and how exciting it is to see millions of people rediscover it in our days!

About the Author

Wolfgang Simson was born in Germany in 1959 and has German, Jewish, and Hungarian roots. He is married to Mercy, and they have three children. After living in the United Kingdom and India, they now live in the south of Germany.

In the midst of beginning a political career, a number of supernatural experiences brought Wolfgang to a confrontation with the reality of Christ. After working as a social worker and taxi driver in Stuttgart, Germany, he earned a master's in theology from Free Evangelical Theological Academy in Basel, Switzerland, where he later taught courses on church growth and mission strategy, and became the assistant to the dean, the late Professor Samuel Külling.

While pursuing a PhD at various academic institutions in Belgium and the United States—doing postgraduate studies in missions and cultural anthropology—Simson discovered that academia did not have the answers to the questions he was after. But God did. In yet another direct experience with God, Simson was shown the purpose, direction, and path of his life, and he has been pursuing this ever since.

Since 1983 Simson has been involved in the planting of several churches and in church-based leadership positions,

while at the same time beginning a life of extensive global research on growing churches, church-planting movements and revivals, and mission breakthroughs.

Wolfgang Simson worked for two decades (1986–2006) as a church-growth, evangelism, and strategy consultant, as well as a researcher and journalist within various Christian networks and regional and global strategy think tanks in close to sixty nations. As one of the founders of Dawn Europa, he has been a board member of both the British and the German Church Growth Associations, a member of the Lausanne Movement in Germany, and editor of the well-known newsletters *Fridayfax* (now *StarFish News*) and *The Mammon-Fax*. He is the author of twelve books that have been translated into twenty languages.

The author's Web site is www.simsonwolfgang.de.

Recommended Reading

Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change the World*

If you wish to study the subject of house churches further, *Houses That Change the World* is the “big brother” of the book you have just read.

Wolfgang Simson, *The Starfish Manifesto*

This foundational book, which introduces The Starfish Project, is a prophetic road map for an apostolic journey. It describes in detail the current global apostolic reformation of the *ekklesia* through a return to Kingdom principles.

Other relevant materials can be found on www.starfishportal.net.

Chapter 1: The Reinvention of Church

1. Based on a study done by Youth With A Mission (YWAM) in 1990; quoted by Floyd McClung in *Basic Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992).
2. “Wie Christliche ist Deutschland,” empirical church attendance survey done in 1992 by DAWN Europa e.V, directed by Wolfgang Simson.
3. D. Elton Trueblood, *While It Is Day: An Autobiography* (Richmond, IN: Yokefellow Press, 1974).

Chapter 2: House Churches in History

1. Origen of Alexandria, early church father.
2. Met Castillo, *The Church in Thy House* (Manila: The Alliance Publishers, 1982).
3. Martin Luther, *Vorrede zur Deutschen Messe*, published in 1526.
4. Ibid.
5. Ken McVety, *The Real Robinson Crusoe* (Coquitlam, B.C.: Word of Life Press, n.d.).
6. Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

Chapter 3: The Nature of House Churches

1. Art Katz, *Apostolic Conversion*, at www.artkatzministries.org.
2. Met Castillo, *The Church in Thy House*.
3. Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997), xii, xiii.

Chapter 4: The Fivefold Ministry

1. David Yonggi Cho, in a personal conversation with the author.
2. Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development* (St. Charles, IL: Churchsmart Resources, 1996).