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**ABSTRACT**

**"DOMUS ECCLESIAE"  
AN EXAMINATION OF HOUSE CHURCHES**

**by**

**Charles J. Griffin**

**Chairman: Norman Miles**

## **ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH**

### **Project Report**

**Andrews University**

**Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary**

**Title: "DOMUS ECCLESIAE": AN EXAMINATION OF HOUSE CHURCHES**

**Name of Researcher: Charles J. Griffin**

**Name and degree of faculty adviser: Norman Miles, Ph.D.**

**Date completed: July 1987**

#### **Problem**

Protestant churches in North America face serious declines in church membership and support. Some Christians have become disillusioned with the status quo of present structures.

#### **Method**

With firsthand convictions coming from involvement in the church in Brazil, I have turned to the Bible to substantiate a theological understanding of the church. Historical, archaeological, and contemporary models are reviewed to question the validity and effectiveness of house churches.

## Results

The NT period was apparently primarily a house-church society due to political and economical restraints. Many of the contemporary house-church models were mainly support, *koinonia*, and fellowship groups that did not have much longevity. The Adventist experiments cited did not accomplish their original objectives.

## Conclusions

House churches divide themselves into three kinds. (1) There are basic independent groups which are fully organized as a church; church membership resides there and all the celebrations of the church are conducted there; they attempt to follow the NT model. These can be found in areas where there are high government restrictions, and the house church becomes the only means of survival. (2) There are groups which call themselves house churches, but they really are not, for they exist primarily for fellowship and continue to maintain a direct relationship to a larger church. (3) Finally, the last group are those which are satellites to a mother church. In this case the house church is used for nurture, fellowship, and outreach, but celebration usually occurs in the context of the larger body. These also do not qualify according to the Biblical model.

There are inherent dangers and a certain vulnerability in house-church activities. House churches seem to attract the "off-shoot" mentality. However, they do have certain strengths, i.e., simplicity, openness, and relatively inexpensive operation costs. House churches can in some instances be used to reach certain socio-economic and cross-cultural groups and are a means to reintegrate people who have become dissatisfied with their own spirituality. They also are excellent places to involve the laity. House churches seem to work best for short periods as interim or transitional organizations.





Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

"DOMUS ECCLESIAE"  
AN EXAMINATION OF HOUSE CHURCHES

A Project Report  
Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
Charles James Griffin

July 1987

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**'DOMUS ECCLESIA'**  
**AN EXAMINATION OF HOUSE CHURCH**

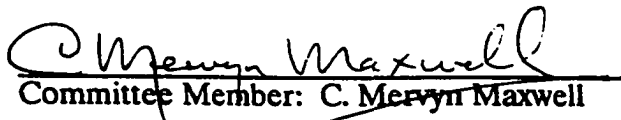
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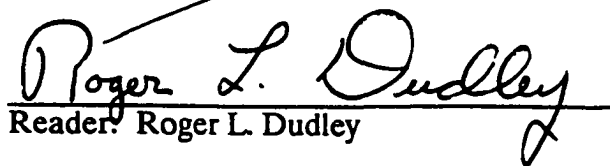
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Committee Member: C. Mervyn Maxwell

  
Reader: Roger L. Dudley

15 Dec. 1986  
Date approved

## DEDICATION

When Clovis Pereira da Silva, a builder and nominal Adventist, came into the office of the North Coast Mission, in Fortaleza, Brazil, and told me that he was about to drop out of his church, neither of us, at that moment, could have anticipated the implications of that visit. For Clovis, there was a radical change in his life. Instead of a lukewarm Christian, he became a very energetic leader of a small church in his own home. For me, there was initiated a whole new understanding of the church. Clovis and laymen like him inspired my initial thinking about house churches.

Members of the Gentry Home Church were very patient and willing to participate in the creation of a new concept of church. Dear friends like Jerry Johnson, Diana Hartfield, Dolores Adams, Rupert and La Veda Gay were anchors to the soul during times of stress. Their support was very crucial and important to this whole process.

Without the wisdom of the wise men of the East and the patience of the saints, this work would never have been completed. Although, at times prospects of completion wore thin, it has been refreshing to have those who, believing in the concept, urged me to finish the task. It never would have happened without friends like Werner Vhymeister, Norman Miles, C. Mervyn Maxwell, Roger Dudley, C. Raymond Holmes, Pat Saliba and others.

The SDA Church has been gracious in placing me in very strategic locations over the last decade where firsthand observations and experimentation with house churches could happen. I am indebted to kind administrators, men who had vision,

men who believed in probing the unknown, and men who were supportive and venturesome even though immediate results were not in the picture.

Evelyn, Larry, Randy, Heidi, and Cindy, my precious tribe, deserve special "kudos" for their long patience and sacrifice throughout the project. While others were enjoying a normal family life, my little crowd never complained while Daddy and husband was shut off with the computer.

Finally, in deep reverence, I dedicate this simple project to my very best friend, Jesus Christ, and to his "body," the church on the earth.

Charles J. Griffin

Singapore

January, 1987

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## PREFACE

The words of Christ, "Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you; and surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:19 NIV) have constituted the greatest challenge the church has faced since its inception. As the years have passed, men have endeavored to accomplish this task given by Christ through just about every conceivable method, going from the ridiculous to the sublime. The only time man has succeeded in carrying out the gospel commission has been when the Holy Spirit was present.

Many religious movements had very small beginnings. A few believers prayed together, committed their lives to be used by the Holy Spirit, and the "Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." With church growth and organization, there came restrictions and formalism, thus effectiveness was diminished. Greater amounts of money have been spent to make up for the lack of participation by the laity. The idea that "bigger is better" gave birth to larger churches where fellowship was set aside for worship that was stiff and formal. In many churches, the service has become structured for formal worship and does not provide for fellowship.

Para-organizations, such as evangelistic associations both independent and on conference and union levels, have come into existence to do the work that the local church has not been able to do. If the church had done what God called it

to do, there would have been no need for evangelists. NT evangelism was done in the context of small groups and usually in members' homes.

In this study, it can be seen how God can still work in small house churches. If studied prayerfully and implemented, I believe this method could be the secret to bring about the Latter Rain and the return of Jesus Christ. The fulfillment of this concept will take commitment and a willingness to give up control for the discussed methods to work. Perhaps, a return to the early methods used by the pioneers of the church would rekindle the fires of evangelism.

The establishment of house churches in countries where there has been very little church growth for years could bring about a renewed interest in the gospel by our members and ministers alike. I highly recommend the principles taught as a method supported by scripture and backed by practical applications.

Kenneth Cox, Evangelist  
Southwestern Union of SDA

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Today in Israel, at the site known as Capernaum on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, there is a sign standing near the ancient ruins of the synagogue. The sign, the same kind placed all over the nation by the Israeli government for tourist purposes, is written in English and Latin and reads as follows:

#### **Domus Ecclesia**

This site was an early Christian house church used by the apostles. It was here in her home that Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law and others according to Matt 8:14-17.<sup>1</sup>

With the Latin words *Domus Ecclesia*, it is not difficult to guess from which tradition this sign originated. The authenticity and historical accuracy of the site, like so many others in Israel, can be called into question. The fact remains, however, that it is there in Israel today, standing as a silent testimony of someone's conviction about the existence of house churches in the past.

#### **Problems in North America**

Mainline Protestantism in North America is in serious trouble and knows it.<sup>2</sup> The influence of many churches is declining. Membership is shrinking.

---

<sup>1</sup>"Domus Ecclesia" is Latin for "house church." My first contact with the sign was in July 1985 at Capernaum, Israel.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas F. Zimmerman, "Eight Warning Signs of a Slumping Denomination," *Evangelical Newsletter*, Oct. 12, 1984, p. 1. Zimmerman was General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God when he wrote this article. He

Evangelism is not keeping up with growth in population. Over the last decade, there has been a general decline in accessions, budgets, and participation. Church leaders are alarmed and, in some cases, desperate. During the 70s and the 80s would be gurus have flooded the market with their panaceas for church woes.<sup>1</sup>

Not all church organizations are in a slump. A leading evangelical magazine indicated recently that some churches are still growing in spite of what is happening in the rest of Christendom.<sup>2</sup> Worldwide, the Pentecostals represent the fastest growing church movement. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is in a close second place and is very consistent in patterns of growth. The yearly percentage of new-member growth among Adventists seldom drops below 5 percent, though this growth among Adventists is not the same around the world. In North America, yearly growth normally averages about 3 percent (see table 1), and much of this is among

---

lists several reasons why churches decline:

a. They became ends in themselves. "Things that start out to be valid become . . . institutionalized. Instead of remaining dynamic, . . . they become impotent and mechanical."

b. They continue with programs that have lost their vitality. . . . "Because it worked 30 years ago, we spin our wheels trying to make it work today."

c. The visible elements of the institution tend to replace the invisible.

d. Self-continuity becomes the reason for being, and supersedes the desire to proclaim the message of the gospel.

e. Orthodoxy in belief is substituted for reality in experience.

f. Quantity dominates at the expense of quality.

g. Conformity to a master program replaces individual initiative and creativity.

h. Increased dependence upon liturgy and corporate worship, accompanied by professional clerical development, results in diminished lay participation.

<sup>1</sup>The James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Mich., in a computer-search performed in July 1985, found 316 such articles.

<sup>2</sup>"The Fastest Growing American Denominations," *Christianity Today* 27 (Jan. 7, 1983): 28.

TABLE 1

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH GROWTH IN NORTH AMERICA  
(Percentages for 1975-84 Decade)

YEAR	CHURCHES	MEMBERSHIP	% OFGROWTH
1975	3601	520,842	3.40
1976	3673	536,649	3.03
1977	3729	551,884	2.83
1978	3850	566,453	2.63
1979	3932	585,050	3.28
1980	3994	604,430	3.31
1981	4043	622,961	3.06
1982	4116	642,317	3.10
1983	4194	660,253	2.79
1984	4241	676,204	2.41

SOURCE: Director of Archives and Statistics, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (Washington, D.C.: General Conference Printing Office, 1975-1984).

Blacks and Hispanics.<sup>1</sup> There is rapid growth in Central and South America and in most of the Third World. A. G. Daniells, president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1901-22, is reported to have said, "If we as a church had the right understanding of ourselves and would act accordingly, millions of people would join the church."<sup>2</sup> This sounds very similar to what Abraham Lincoln once said, "If we could first know where we are and whither we are tending, we would

<sup>1</sup>Gottfried Oosterwal, Seminar on Church Growth, Feb. 22-Mar. 11, 1982.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

better judge *what to do* and *how to do it*." Does the church have a clear understanding of itself? Does the church know where it is going? Does the church know what to do and how to do it?

### **Statement of Purpose**

It is the purpose of this project to establish a New Testament understanding of the church as the "Body of Christ," and to assess selected "house church"<sup>1</sup> experiments to determine the usefulness and proper application of these simple structures in the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

### **House Church Defined**

A house-church, according to a limited definition, is a small group of believers who, as the body of Christ, organize themselves as an independent congregation and normally conduct the functions of church in a member's home or in other informal places.

In the broader definition house-church is a group of believers who maintain their membership in a large church, but choose to conduct many of their church functions in an open, informal manner in the coziness and warmth of their own homes. Some church leaders who use this expanded view of house-church have successfully incorporated some of the small-group concepts of house-church even into very large churches.

When used in connection with "house-church," the word "house" indicates a quality of intimacy, informality, and openness associated with one's own home. The word "church" reaffirms the connection to the body of Christ and connotes its

---

<sup>1</sup>Hans-Ruedi Weber, "The Church in the House," *Lairy*, April 1957, p. 42. Weber is considered by some as the father of the contemporary house church movement and was one of the first writers in modern times to use the phrase "house church."



mission and its relationship to the historical church. It is "church" in the sense that it is still connected to the mainstream. Although every aspect of church may not appear in house churches, the essentials are found there. Those who attend sense that even though the group is small and very informal, it marches to the same drum beat of the parent denomination.

While there is a strong emphasis on sharing, caring, and a high level of fellowship, house churches are meant to exceed the confined scope of what most people understand in *koinonia*. Artificiality and smugness should have no place in a house church. And by all means house churches are not to become the haven of selfish, anti-denominational, anti-organizational people.

Just because a group meets in a house does not necessarily mean that it is a house church. Some groups find it convenient to conduct fellowship meetings in member's homes. These obviously are not house churches but simply extensions of a larger church. A house church differs from neighborhood Bible classes in that in the house church are found all of the major functions of the church, e.g., the sacraments of baptism, communion, and marriage. Additionally, membership resides there. In the house church provision should be made to care for the various age levels of the members. Another test of a house church is whether or not it is fully organized by its judicatory board.

Reasons people give for choosing house churches are varied. Many people prefer a house church because they sense that (1) the house church format is very similar to NT concepts of worship, (2) the small group provides a context for fellowship that is warm, intimate, and open and often appeals to those who have become disillusioned with religion, (3) the house church serves well as a support group and is conducive to spiritual nurture, (4) the house church provides a means of survival in emergency situations, and finally, (5) house churches can be used in

certain cultural and economic situations for planting the gospel.

This examination of house church begins by answering a very basic question: What is the church? To answer this, the Pauline teaching of the church as the "Body of Christ" is examined.

## CHAPTER II

### WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

#### Introduction

What is the church? Leslie Newbigin defines the church as "a society of human beings, . . . a visible community among other human communities."<sup>1</sup> Robert Bellarmine, writing from a Roman Catholic viewpoint in the nineteenth century, says essentially the same thing, but adds: ". . . the one and true church is the community of men brought together by the profession of the same Christian faith and conjoined in the legitimate pastors."<sup>2</sup>

Our English word *church*, like the German *kirke*, Swedish *kyrka*, Slav *cerkow*, and Scottish *kirk*, stems from the Byzantine Greek *kuriakon*, meaning "belonging to the Lord," or sometimes meaning "house of the Lord" or "his people."<sup>3</sup> By contrast, some European languages derive their word "church" from the Greek *ekklesia* and the Italian *chiesa*.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Leslie Newbigin, *Household of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1953), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Bellarmine, *De Ecclesia Militante*, 3 vols. (Naples: Giulaniano, 1857), 2:75.

<sup>3</sup>Everett F. Harrison, ed, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1960), p. 123.

<sup>4</sup>David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 65.

## Ekklesia

*Ekklesia* is the NT word underlying "church" in most English translations. It appears in such passages as the controversial Matt 16:18, in which Jesus said He would build His church "on the rock." It also appears in the passage about discipline in which Jesus said that the sin of an unrepentant brother should be told to the "church" (Matt 18:17).

*Ekklesia* was a Greek word with a secular (nonreligious) meaning that was commonly used in the Graeco-Roman culture of the early church. William Barclay in describing the *ekklesia* says:

In the great classical days in Athens the *ekklesia* was the convened assembly of the people. It consisted of all the citizens of the city who had not lost their civic rights. Apart from the fact that its decisions must conform to the laws of the State, its powers were to all intents and purposes unlimited. It elected and dismissed magistrates and directed the policy of the city. It declared war, made peace, contracted treaties and arranged alliances. It elected generals and other military officers. It assigned troops to different campaigns and dispatched them from the city. It was ultimately responsible for the conduct of all military operations. It raised and allocated funds. Two things are interesting to note. First, all its meetings began with prayer and sacrifice. Second, it was a true democracy. . . . It was an assembly where everyone had an equal right and equal duty to take part.<sup>1</sup>

This use of *ekklesia* appears three times in Acts 19, where the word refers to a secular assembly that was thrown into confusion over Paul's ministry in Ephesus. For the Greeks, the meaning was very clear: the *ekklesia* was an assembly of citizens, the *ek-kletoi*, summoned together by a herald.

In addition to this secular use of *ekklesia*, early Christian writers in the NT also used the same word in speaking of the church in four ways:

1. The *universal church*: the entire company of believers. God has made Christ "the head over all things for the church." It is "through the church" that

---

<sup>1</sup>William Barclay, *New Testament Words* (London: SCM Press, 1964), pp. 68-69.

the manifold wisdom of God might be made known and God's glory is to be "in the church" (Eph 1:22; 3:10, 21; 1 Cor 10:32; 12:28; Phil 3:6; Col 1:5, 8, 24).

2. A *particular local church*, such as the church at Cenchrae, Corinth, Thessalonica, or Laodicea (Rom 16:1; 1 Cor 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; Col 4:6).

3. The *actual assembly* of believers in any place as they meet together for worship (1 Cor 11:18; 14:19, 23).

4. A *small house church*, the regular meeting of a small group of believers in a town or city (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2).

Earl D. Radmacher says, "Nowhere in the NT does the word *ekklesia* mean a building. The *ekklesia* of the NT is never composed of stones and lime, or bricks and mortar."<sup>1</sup> Even where the term "building" is used to describe the church, it is used in a figurative sense as in "Ye, also as living stones are built up a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, . . . a people for God's own possession" (1 Pet 2:5-9).

### The Church and Its Functions

There are many opinions today about the church and its function. Ray Steadman in *Body Life* gives a description of the church. He says that Mr. John Q. Public, U.S.A., normally considers the church as

. . . nothing but a snooty religious country club with traditional rituals as sacred as those at a fox hunt. To others the church is a political action group, a pressure bloc of do-gooders, waging battle against social ills.

Some see the church as a kind of non-segregated waiting room for people expecting to take the next bus for heaven. Some view it as a kind of low calorie dessert for any who want something nice that won't hurt public image. Others think of it as a regular meeting of religious hotheads enjoying their weekend religious democracy and trying to legislate morals for the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Earl D. Radmacher, *What the Church Is All About* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), p. 161.

<sup>2</sup>Ray Steadman, *Body Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 12.

It may be added also that many people think of the church as:

1. The beautiful colonial building on the south loop;
2. The place over in the valley; the one on Main Street;
3. The one where Bill Smith preaches;
4. The Gothic structure with the lovely pipe organ.

In order to overcome "ecclesiolatry" and what Howard Snyder calls "edifice complex,"<sup>1</sup> a serious look at biblical images or models is in order. Paul Minear, in *Images of the Church*,<sup>2</sup> depicts ninety-six such models. The use of metaphors is common practice. For example, when one speaks of the bald eagle, black panther, or *fleur-de-lis*, one immediately thinks of such qualities as courage, militancy, or purity.<sup>3</sup> Among the many NT emblems of the church, one finds such things as the rock, a fortress, a temple, the house of God, and the body of Christ. As symbols, they speak in ways that would otherwise be incomprehensible. They also convey a meaning that is understood in a nonconceptual manner. They are grasped not simply by the mind but by the imagination, by the heart, or, more properly, by the whole man. The way one defines "church" obviously influences his relationship to the church and the implementation of his church's mission. A tension develops if one group in a congregation regards the church exclusively as the "agency for the salvation of mankind" while another sees it as a "fortress." One group seeks to enlarge the kingdom on earth while the other is content to maintain the status quo. This is an issue that confronts Adventists today. In fact, some feel that in

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<sup>1</sup>Howard A. Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1975), p. 78.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978), p. 24.

the Adventist church a clearly defined theology of the church remains to be developed. Just what is Adventist "ecclesiology"? What is the church?

There is a potential problem for some Adventists who would limit their understanding of "church" to these selected statements by Ellen G. White:

The church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world.<sup>1</sup>

The church is God's fortress, His city of refuge, which He holds in a revolted world.<sup>2</sup>

Enfeebled and defective as it may appear, the church is the one object upon which God bestows in a special sense His supreme regard.<sup>3</sup>

Ellen G. White does a magnificent job of defining the church here. However, it appears that some have a very narrow or limited understanding what the church really is! Some church members have forced a definition of church to be only what the church does and not what the church "is." The church *is* a soul-winning agency; it *is* a fortress; it *is* the object of God's supreme desire; however, this is not all that it *is*. If the definition of church is limited to a narrow understanding of what it does, the broader meaning is lost. It appears that some Seventh-day Adventists have a very meager understanding of what the church really was meant to be.

### Church as the "Body of Christ"

No one biblical or Ellen G. White image of the church can summarize all that "church" stands for. However, one which provides a very broad spectrum of understanding about the church is "the body of Christ."

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<sup>1</sup>Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1911), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

The biblical use of the term "body of Christ" was very much used in Pauline writings. It came quite naturally to his mind. In the secular world, the concept that a community constitutes a kind of human body--"the body politic"--was common and readily understood. Thus, the term "body of Christ" must have awakened responsive chords in the minds of Paul's Corinthian hearers.<sup>1</sup> "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor 12:27, NIV). Clarence T. Craig believes that Paul makes a deliberate use of his words here by saying ". . . the church is not *like* nor *can it be compared to* the body of Christ, rather, the church *is* the body of Christ."<sup>2</sup> Exactly how the crucified One, who in His resurrected and glorified body stands at the right hand of God, is able to distribute Himself throughout the cities of the Mediterranean is a mystery which Paul never attempts to explain.

The Greek word for body, "soma," has no real equivalent in the OT. When "soma" is used in the Septuagint, it seems to reflect the general understanding of "body" in the sense of the "whole person" or simply as "person." There are some very interesting concepts in the Greek usage of "soma"; Edward Schweizer in *Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* gives a synopsis of the development of the word. Early (400 B.C.) it was used to contrast the physical body with the soul. Later (100 B.C.), it came to mean a person. In NT times, "soma" belonged to the larger cosmos. As streams flow into the ocean and the air

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<sup>1</sup>Lawrence O. Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke, *A Theology of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1980), pp. 31-32.

<sup>2</sup>Clarence T. Craig, *Interpreters Bible*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952-1957), 10 (1953):156.



is about the world, so the world is the body of God. Man was seen as a part of the cosmos, a part of the whole.<sup>1</sup>

"Soma" occurs 142 times in the NT. It appears 51 times in the Gospels and 91 times in Paul's writing.<sup>2</sup> In his epistles, Paul had to write in a way that dealt with the deeply rooted intellectual and generally accepted world views of his readers. He presented Christ as the answer to the problems that the community faced. Paul attempted to establish the place and importance of the universal church and chose to do so in terms that had strong inferences to the understanding of the people of his time.

The body of Christ is precisely the church in which Christ moves out into the world. The preaching of the gospel by the church is the answer to cosmic anxiety. In this body Christ permeates the cosmos. This eschatological event is to Paul a universally visible sign in which the mystery of God, concealed for eons, is disclosed, and God's plan of salvation is fulfilled.<sup>3</sup>

### **Incarnational Significance of the Body of Christ**

To understand the significance of church as being the "body of Christ," it is necessary to review the incarnation. Several key passages summarize the Christian doctrine of the incarnation:

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<sup>1</sup>Eduard Schweizer, "Soma, somatikos, sossomos," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., edited by Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 7 (1971):1025-1039.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 7:1057.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 7:1080.

The word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

When the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem, those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. (Gal 4:4-5).

Who being in the very nature of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made him himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8)

He is the image of the invisible. God the firstborn over all creation. . . . God was well pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him through him to reconcile to himself all things whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. . . . For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (Col 1:15, 20; 2:9).<sup>1</sup>

Most Christians accept by faith that Jesus did verily come in the flesh.

Karl Barth writes on behalf of numerous Christians:

There is no doubt that He is a real man. He is born of a human mother; He lives and works as a man; He sees and hears as a man; He speaks in a human language; He suffers and dies as a man. . . . He is not a real man in spite of but because of the fact that He is the Son of God and, therefore, acts as the Savior. For this reason He remains a real man even in His resurrection and ascension and session at the right hand of God, and it is a real man that will come again.<sup>2</sup>

Barth concludes that Jesus did not come in a "neutral humanity" (not disconnected from the cosmos) but as a real person, a being, a "human soul of a human body."<sup>3</sup>

Ellen White makes similar comments. "Christ did not make-believe take human nature; He did verily take it. . . . He is declared to be a real man,"<sup>4</sup> "fully

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<sup>1</sup>All Bible references are taken from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Barth, "The Lord Who Is Servant", *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) pp. 143-144.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>4</sup>Ellen G. White, "The Wonderful Condescension of God," *SDA Bible Commentary*, ed. F. D. Nichol (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1953-57), 5:1130.

human, even the man Christ Jesus."<sup>1</sup> "He had bodily weariness to be relieved,<sup>2</sup> He hungered,<sup>3</sup> thirsted,<sup>4</sup> slept,<sup>5</sup> became weary,<sup>6</sup> suffered and died."<sup>7</sup>

In taking our nature, the Savior has bound Himself to humanity by a tie that is never to be broken. . . . God gave His only begotten to become one of the human family, forever to retain His human nature. . . . God has adopted human nature into the person of His Son and carried the same into the highest heaven."<sup>8</sup>

The concept of the church as the "body of Christ" finds its foundation in incarnational theology. The very being of God, His transcendent reality, is comprehended better because Jesus came in human flesh. Reconciliation of the world to God, the justification and sanctification of man, the elimination of confusion and restoration of Christ. Jesus Himself said it: "Because I live, ye shall live also" (John 14:19). As Barth declares: "The gulf is not merely bridged, it is closed. Man is not just comforted and admonished; he is rescued from destruction and renewed in the being assigned him by his Creator."<sup>9</sup>

Before Jesus came and entered human flesh, the ability to conceive of the transcendent God was remote. As the Incarnate, He "talked man's language." They could touch Him, hear Him, see Him. It was Christ's body that made the difference.

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<sup>1</sup>Ellen G. White, "Diety and Pre-existence of Christ," *SDA Bible Commentary*, 5:917.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 5:1130.

<sup>3</sup>Matt 4:2.

<sup>4</sup>John 19:28.

<sup>5</sup>Matt 8:24; cf. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1898), pp. 333-334.

<sup>6</sup>John 4:6; cf. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 359-363.

<sup>7</sup>Luke 24:46.

<sup>8</sup>Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup>Barth, *Theological Foundations*, p. 174.

### **Body of Christ as a Prolongation of Christ Incarnate**

Paul says that "in Christ, we, who are many, form one body" (Rom 12:5); and that "though all its parts are many, they form one body" (1 Cor 12:12); Gentiles could, through baptism, enter the body (1 Cor 12:13) or become "members together of one body" (Eph 3:6, 13), and in so doing, become "members of his body" (Eph 5:30). (The KJV says "of his flesh, and of his bones.")

The apostle means that the church here is an earthly extension of Jesus who is in heaven. The Lord reveals Himself to humanity through His "body."

### **The Body of Christ as a Living Organism**

The Pauline epistles clearly teach that the "body of Christ" is a living organism. Christ followers are members of a growing body, not a stale institution.

The apostle Paul notes this in Eph 4:12-16:

So that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by cunning craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

In 1 Cor 12:12-31, Paul affirms that Christ's followers form one body.

Note the following selected passages from vs. 12-20 and 27:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given one Spirit to drink. And the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were any eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has arranged the parts in

the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Scripture teaches that in its essential nature the church is a living organism. Its adherents are part of a body, not merely members of an institution. Those commissioned to establish the congregation should determine that every expression of church should comply with its inherent organic nature, in other words, be totally connected to Christ the head and not attempt to go contrary to His biddings. To do contrary would be in violation of the central meaning of the "body of Christ." Church structure should be in harmony with the true nature of the Christ, not a stumbling copy of man's notions for organizing institutions.<sup>1</sup>

The church as the body of Christ is not a mere institution, but a living organism, renewing and reproducing itself. A living organism can have only one head from which originate all impulses, directives, and authority. To be severed from the head spells instant death. To be connected to Christ as Head means revitalization and constant renewal. No other part of the body can perform this function. An institution, on the other hand, is segmented with tiers of authority and delegated responsibility. There is usually a hierarchy. Work functions may be duplicated and signals may become confused. Not so in the body. When the head gives the message, the entire body receives its signals--simultaneously and inter-dependently it cooperates for the fulfillment of the message. Larry Richards explains how the body works:

In an organism, each individual part is in intimate connection with the head, and the head sends impulses and commands directly to it. In a sense, the head of an organism is in immediate and personal touch with each

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<sup>1</sup>Richards and Hoeldtke, *A Theology of Church Leadership*, pp. 62-64.

member, and each member is in immediate and personal touch with the head.<sup>1</sup>

Paul could have written to the "body of Christians." Instead he wrote to the churches in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, and Colosse and addressed each group as the "body of Christ." His practice connotes not only the harmonious unity of the church but, even more, the reality that even a local church as a body depends upon the Head of the whole church. Paul is also saying that among members of the church, there must be the same cooperation as in the human body. Proper growth can take place only when the entire body supports and shares with the rest of the body, meaning, of course, that even the lesser members are important (1 Cor 12:22, 23). Thus, the body is complete and functional only when all parts function together. As Paul says: "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph 4:16).

Jerry Wofford and Kenneth Kilinski, reflecting on the church being an organism, indicate one major cause of failure in the church:

The church of today is failing to fulfill its purpose largely because it has ceased to be an organism. A church in which one person preaches, a few teach, and a few others work in an administrative ministry, but the vast majority simply listen, learn, and follow without becoming functioning members of the body, is not an integrated organism.<sup>2</sup>

Watchman Nee, the Chinese craftsman who has come to be recognized as a profound theologian, sums up the question in this way:

God is not satisfied with single, separate Christians. When we believed on the Lord and partook of Him, we became members of His body. Oh, that God would cause this fact to break upon us! Do I seek spiritual experiences for myself? Do I make converts for my denomination? Or have I caught the wisdom of the one heavenly Man, and realized that God

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Jerry Wofford and Kenneth Kilinski, *Organization and Leadership in the Local Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), p. 134.

is seeking to bring men into that? When I do, salvation, deliverance, endowment with the Spirit, yes, everything in Christian experience will be seen from a new viewpoint; everything for me will be transformed.<sup>1</sup>

Nee adds that "as man's personality is expressed through his body, so is Christ displayed through the church."<sup>2</sup> Then he concludes:

The work of Christ now is to love and cherish her, to protect and preserve her from disease and blemish, caring thus for her, because He loves her as his own self, because, speaking reverently, the church is Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Is not this what Jesus said to the one who had ardently persecuted the church: "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting (Acts 9:5)? Whom had Paul persecuted? The church! Jesus so identified Himself with the church that He could say that in persecuting the church, Paul persecuted Him. Paul makes this correlation emphatically in 1 Cor 12:12 "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts . . . they form one body." And again in Col 1:24: "For his body's sake, which is the church."

It is evident that the church is an earthly extension of Jesus who is in heaven. His incarnation continues through His "body." While He is in heaven and the head of the body, the rest of the body performs functions for Him here. Men's hands are His hands, their feet, His feet. The church is a prolongation of Him and is a living organism receiving direction and authority from Him. This brings profound obligations to those who are the "church."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Watchman Nee, *What Shall This Man Do* (Fort Washington, Penn.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1967), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>4</sup>Matt 25:31-46. Christ has no other hands but ours to do His work on earth today.

In first-century Greek terms, mankind belongs to the *cosmos*, the *polis*, the *body*. The world, all of it, belongs to God. The church as the "body of Christ" is in the world for the revelation of God. If the world cannot see Him, it may be because it does not see the true church. The mission and ministry of the church must conform to this larger backdrop of meaning. Christ is personally absent, yet mystically present through His body, the church, and through this reality He extends His ministry to the world.



## CHAPTER III

### NEW TESTAMENT HOUSE CHURCHES

Hans-Josef Klauck suggests there are definite historical precedents for the phenomena of house churches coming from the Greco-Roman world:

1. The house-cult was of great importance in religious practice, corresponding to the valued role of the household within the social structure. Cicero praised this cultic practice, and Plato and Aristotle spoke respectfully of family and clan gods. Household customs, including food offerings to the gods, were observed at daily meals. Plutarch calls the banquet table an "altar of the gods of friendship and hospitality."

2. A bridge between household piety and state religion was the private cult, like that of Philadelphia in Lydia. A donor fitted out a house dedicated to cultic gods and assembled a community subject to strict cultic discipline.

3. The Oregones (sacrificial societies) at Athens were a private cult. Such an organization was popular among devotees of the gods of Asia Minor. These associations centered around a house or common building, indispensable for assemblies, conferences, and meals. They were socially or occupationally homogeneous and often bore divine names: Dionysiasts, Soteriasts, and Sarapiasts.

4. The Sarapiasts held famous cult-feasts, drawing a scornful notice from Tertullian. These feasts could be held in shrines or private homes.

5. The closest model for early Christianity, however, was Judaism. Jewish household worship was extremely important. According to Philo, every house was a temple and the whole people priests. And when public worship was made difficult, the home could take over its function.

6. The Essenes probably carried on their common life outside Qumran in houses. Josephus refers to "special buildings" that he later calls "houses."

7. The synagogue itself arose out of separation from the Temple during

the exile. The oldest synagogues were created by altering private houses and villas.<sup>1</sup>

From Klauck's observations it is not difficult to see that the leaders of the early church followed a model that was very visible in the culture about them. Using the home as a center of worship was an accepted practice, and Christians apparently adapted it for their own use.

### Early Christian Worship Places

The oldest documents referring to Christian worship show that the faithful assembled in the houses of certain members of the church. At Jerusalem they met from house to house (Acts 2:46), and at Troas in an upper room (Acts 20:7, 8). Paul designated Gaius, the host of the whole church of Corinth (Rom 16:23), a designation which may well mean that when they came together as a church, they met in his house. The mention of upper rooms does not prove that such were the only parts of the houses in which these gatherings took place, and it is good to remember that these houses were usually the small houses of poor people, constructed in the usual manner of the Graeco-Roman world. Since the rooms were generally small, there would be no place for the assembly as soon as it got beyond a small number.

This domestic worship was in harmony with the spirit of early Christianity, full as it was of the idea of one family of brethren. In the first century, Christianity as *religio illicita* was not free to erect buildings. In Jerusalem, for a very short time, Christians worshipped at the temple and in the synagogues, under the umbrella of Judaism, which was a *religio licita*. Later the house became the natural place in which the church could survive. Stanley Jackson writing in the

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<sup>1</sup>Hans-Josef Klauck, "The House-Church as Way of Life," *Theology Digest* 30 (1982):156.

*New Schaff Herzog* states: "The Primitive Church, therefore, lacked not only the means, but the motive to erect any special buildings for divine worship; it had no temples and expressly rejected the idea of building them."<sup>1</sup> Marvin Vincent thinks the believers met in homes in order to avoid detection by the authorities.<sup>2</sup> Christianity faced several challenges in this period. Ellison comments on this:

The moment the young church had to disassociate itself from the local synagogue, which represented a *religio licita* . . . it became an illegal association. . . . It was therefore in the Christian interest to avoid gatherings of any size that would attract official attention. When persecution broke out, it was in addition most unwise to put all of one's eggs into one basket.<sup>3</sup>

There are four key passages that mention house churches in NT times. These texts are Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; and Phlm 2--in addition to the fifty passages in the NT that depict some facet of house-church activity in the first century.<sup>4</sup>

### Key House-Church Passages

Rom 16:5: *e kat' oikon auton ekklesia.*  
"Greet also the church that meets at their house."

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<sup>1</sup>Stanley McCauley Jackson, "The First Places of Christian Worship," *The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia*, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1951), 1:264.

<sup>2</sup>Marvin R. Vincent, "The Church in the House," *Critical Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to Philemon*, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1897), 7:176-177.

<sup>3</sup>H. L. Ellison, *The Household Church* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup>Certain inferences to house-church activities can be seen in the following texts: Matt 8:14; 9:23, 28; 10:12, 14; 12:25; 13:1, 36; 17:25; 26:6, 18; Mark 1:29; 2:1, 15; 3:25; 6:10; 7:24; 9:33; 10:10; 14:3; Luke 4:38; 5:29; 7:44; 8:39, 41; 10:5, 7, 8, 38; 11:17; 12:52; John 4:53; 11:31; Acts 2:2; 10:2; 11:12, 14; 16:15, 31, 34; 18:8; 21:8; 28:32; Rom 16:1, 5, 10, 11, 14, 15; 1 Cor 16:19; 1 Tim 3:4, 5, 12; Titus 1:11; Phlm 3:2.

This passage refers to the house church of Priscilla and Aquila, colleagues of the apostle Paul, who were tentmakers by trade but evangelists by calling. These people had previously lived in Rome but had been driven out by Claudius.<sup>1</sup> They had returned to Rome and were caring for the needs of the believers, just as Gaius had done at Corinth (Rom 16:23). During their short stay in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila had used their home for a "house church," this practice appears to have been a part of their religious life.<sup>2</sup>

What does the "church that meets in your house" mean? The expression is regarded by some scholars to mean only the immediate household and everyone that lived there as being the church.<sup>3</sup> Others expand the meaning to include not just the immediate family but also the *familia*, or other Christians who found it convenient to meet for worship in that particular house.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars understand the phrase to mean not just the immediate family and close friends but the church for that whole city, including all the believers living there. If they are right, the "church" referred to the house church of Priscilla and Aquila of Rome--meaning that the Christian Church in Rome was the house church meeting in Priscilla and Aquila's home.

Lenski views the typical NT house church as a smaller assembly, meeting at

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<sup>1</sup>John Wesley, "Rom 16:5," *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, (New York: Carlton and Philips, 1854), p. 237.

<sup>2</sup>Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament--Epistle to the Romans*, 8 vols. (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1889), 5:556.

<sup>3</sup>William G. T. Shedd, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), p. 425.

<sup>4</sup>"Church that is in the house" [Rom 16:5], *A Critical Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1921), p. 786.

one person's home, but which was also a part of the larger congregation of that city.

A part of the congregation made the house of Aquila and Priscilla their regular place of meeting. This couple evidently possessed means, and Aquila's business must have been extensive. It is suggested that, when, with all the Jews, he was expelled from Rome by Claudius, he did not sell his house and that he had now returned to occupy it once more. It seems to have been an early custom in the church to have parts of the congregation assemble regularly in the house of some family that was able to accommodate a goodly number, the family freely granting this privilege at this time when other suitable places were not readily found. Many could gather in the open court of a more commodious house. It is not safe, however, to conclude that, because we read of no church buildings, no large building was available and rented for the meeting of the entire congregation.<sup>1</sup>

Eduardo Schweitzer has no trouble identifying the activity that proceeded in the house of Priscilla and Aquila as being an *ekklesia*. He sees the inclusion of the term "church in their house" to be couched in the context of a profound discussion of the nature and significance of the *ekklesia*.<sup>2</sup>

John Calvin concurs by saying that the fact that the group was referred to as a congregation and not as a church was Paul's way of conferring great honor on the Christians in Rome. The way in which they conducted worship was indeed "church" even though the church was in their house.<sup>3</sup>

For some reason, Paul included the names of twenty-seven people who seem to have been attached to this group--about the right number of people for a house church. It may be that Paul's twenty-seven people constituted the membership list of that church. They were: Epaenetus, Mary, Andronicus, Junias, Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, Aristobulus, Herodion, Narcissus, Tryphoena, Tryphosa,

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<sup>1</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 12 vols. (Columbus: Wartburg, 1945), 6:904.

<sup>2</sup>Schweizer, "Ekklesia," *TDNT*, 3:506.

<sup>3</sup>John Calvin, "Rom 16:5," *Calvin's New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 322.

Persis, Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Philologus, Julia, Nereus, Nereus' sister, and Olympas. Paul adds the term, "the brethren with them" and "all the saints with them," which may mean that Paul does not remember the rest of the group or that there were accessions to the church since Paul last received information. At least it is clear from this passage that

1. There was at least one Christian community in Rome
2. The group was considered an *ekklesia* by the apostle
3. The church was a house church that met regularly at Priscilla and

Aquila's home in Rome.

1 Cor 16:19: *sun te kar' oikon auton ekklesia*

"The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.

This text also speaks of Priscilla and Aquila, who graciously opened their home in Ephesus for the function of church. For a short time, because of the persecution of Claudius, Priscilla and Aquila had left Rome and taken up residence in Ephesus. This indicates their consecration: wherever their house was, there was their church.

Godet, a French theologian, sees the *kata* in this verse in its particular form as distributive and indicative of other similar house churches in Ephesus.<sup>1</sup> The fact that Paul says, "*The churches* (plural) of Asia salute you" (vs. 19), indicates he had had frequent contact with the representatives of those churches. Godet concludes that Paul had in mind the multitude of small groups that met in the homes of Christians in Colassae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea; these were those that sent their greetings to the house church in Corinth.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>F. L. Godet, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 2:469.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

Calvin makes an interesting observation in his commentary on 1 Cor 16:19:

[How] fitting it would be that all families of believers should be organized in a way as to be so many little churches.<sup>1</sup>

Col 4:15: *Kar' oikon autes ekklesian*

"Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house."

Writing to the Colossian Christians, Paul urged them to convey his greetings to the Christians in the neighboring city of Laodicea, which lay about ten miles to the northwest. He mentioned one member of the Laodicean church specifically, Nympha. There is some debate as to whether this name is masculine or feminine.<sup>2</sup> Many of the modern versions such as the RSV, NASB, and NIV concur with Nympha's being a woman. Women were known to have opened their homes to NT house churches. In Jerusalem, one group met in the home of Mary, the mother of Mark (Acts 12:12). It appears that Priscilla was probably a more aggressive leader than her husband (Rom 16:5). Other women mentioned include Dorcas (Acts 9:36), Phebe, "our sister of the church in Cenchrea," (Rom 16:1), and Chloe (1 Cor 1:11). Whoever Nympha was, he or she continued in the early church custom of welcoming a church into his or her home.

Phlm 2: *te kat' oikon tou ekklesia*

"To Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home."

The letter to Philemon indicates the social standing of Philemon, in whose home it was possible to entertain a Christian congregation for its seasons of worship.

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<sup>1</sup>Calvin, *Romans*, p. 356.

<sup>2</sup>W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Expositors Greek New Testament*, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 3:547.

Eerdman suggests that the letter to Philemon, being addressed to the "church," saved it from the fate of most personal notes, which tended to be lost or destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

### **Evidence of House Churches in the Book of Acts**

There are several indications in the book of Acts that house-churches were known and accepted in the days of the apostles. Since the book is commonly considered a key for understanding early church organization, a review of the passages is in order.

#### **House to House**

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. . . . Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes ["house to house," NASB] and ate together. (Acts 2:42-46)

#### **Joppa**

The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius, the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say. . . . Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. . . . Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. . . . Then Peter said, Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Ghost. . . . And he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10:22-48)

#### **Jerusalem**

When this had dawned on him [Peter] , he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. (Acts 12:12ff)

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<sup>1</sup>Charles R. Eerdman, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1929), p. 129.



## Philippi

One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God . . . and when she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." (Acts 16:14, 15)

As a purple merchant, Lydia was presumably a successful business woman and was more or less well known in her community. Paul succeeded in attracting a cross-section of people to Jesus Christ. Upon hearing the gospel probably for the first time by the river (Acts 16:13), Lydia invited Paul to come to her home.<sup>1</sup> On the surface this appears to be nothing more than a hospitable gesture. (Paul advocated hospitality, Rom 12:13). The hotels of the day were abominable, and Christians were both safe and more comfortable in the homes of believers. However, there seems to be more than hospitality here. The apostle undoubtedly wanted to establish a church in Philippi. It would be difficult for a congregation to meet each week by the river; it would need a place in case of inclement weather. Lydia's home was obviously large enough. The *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* indicates that a church was formed in her home:

The group formed the first Christian church in Europe founded by Paul. By its loving hospitality and steadfast adherence to the faith, it won a special place in Paul's affection.<sup>2</sup>

There is another reference to a religious function taking place in a home in Philippi:

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the

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<sup>1</sup>Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 3:253. Robertson indicates that "and her household" means "into my house" and would include all of those that live there, including slaves.

<sup>2</sup>"She Was Baptized" [Acts 16:15], *SDA Bible Commentary*, 7 vols., ed. F. D. Nichol (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1953-57), 6:330.

others in his house . . . then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailor brought them into his *house* and set a meal before them, and the whole family was filled with joy, because they had come to believe in God. (Acts 16:31-34)

What does this text indicate about house church activity? It declares that when the jailor accepted Jesus Christ, his first desire and commitment was to bring Christ to his family. Religion was home centered. Even though this text does not directly indicate such, it would be hard to imagine that some type of church function did not commence with this newly baptized family.

### **Corinth**

Arriving in Corinth, Paul found his tentmaking friends, Aquila and Priscilla, who had been driven out of Rome by Claudius. They had much in common with Paul, being tentmakers and gospel enthusiasts, and must have welcomed Paul into their home as a guest. It was in Corinth that the apostle attempted to preach to the Jews. When he was rejected, he declared:

From now on I will go to the Gentiles. . . . Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized. (Acts 18:6-8)

Titius Justus was an uncircumcised Gentile. His house was an appropriate place for both Jews and Gentiles to meet, and doubtless Gentiles were more ready to come to his house than to the home of a Jew. The house church in Justus's home proved to be a good evangelistic center, for shortly, Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, was baptized (Acts 18:8). This is a very powerful witness of home religion. When it seemed that formal religion failed in the synagogue, the simple testimony of a small church next door was able to bear effective testimony to Jesus Christ; as a result the ruler of the synagogue and his household became Christians.

## Rome

And when they had set a day for him, they came to him at his lodging [Paul's house] in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God, and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the law of Moses and from the prophets, from morning until evening.

And he stayed two full years in *his own rented* quarters and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered. (Acts 28:23, 30, 31, KJV)

### Other New Testament References to House Churches

"Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas" (1 Cor 1:16).

The baptism of the household of Stephanas indicated the first fruits of Paul's work in Achaia (1 Cor 16:15). Stephanas was with Paul at the time that he wrote 1 Cor 16:17. Once again, it appears that when the apostle established a church in a city, he worked through an individual and sought to baptize the entire family, including the household slaves. By this method, he left a base firmly rooted in a home for the continuance of the gospel in that city.

Several other "household" texts include Gal 6:10 (KJV), ". . . the household of faith"; Eph 2:19, ". . . members of God's household"; Phil 4:22, ". . . Caesar's household"; and 2 Tim 4:19, ". . . household of Onesimus." In the case of the last two references it appears that Paul is speaking of churches that met in these two homes.

Paul makes a very interesting comment which can be understood to indicate a problem in some of the house churches. He states: "Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert *whole houses*, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake" (Titus 1:11, KJV).

Paul held these troublemakers, whoever they were, in great contempt. The reference to circumcision (Titus 1:10) indicates they were Jewish. Apparently they created havoc with the church by going around to all of the *houses* and subverting them. Understanding as we do the important role of house churches in the apostolic period, it is very easy to recognize what was taking place. After the apostle left, early dissidents went from house church to house church attempting to destroy the faith and confidence of the believers.

The documentation of the NT strongly supports the fact that when early Christians were excluded from the temple and the synagogues, they began to utilize what was available to them for worship--their own homes. This concept was not anything new as strong precedents for this model existed in the Graeco-Roman world.

As Christianity flourished and spread, the church in many places found permanence in the homes of wealthy converts. Often these converts brought their entire household along with them to form the "church in their house." From the evidence of the NT, especially in the book of Acts, it can be seen that the church in this period was rapidly expanding.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE HOUSE CHURCH AFTER THE NEW TESTAMENT

The use of private homes for Christian assemblies was an acceptable practice during the apostolic period. Was there any change after this time? What form did the church take in the centuries that followed? One group of scholars has read into Heb 10:25 (the admonition not to forsake the general assembly) "that they had disassociated themselves from the main body of the church, forming a small house group."<sup>1</sup> Their intent is to show that house churches were already disdained by the apostles in the first century. But this conclusion defies all of the epistolary evidence of Paul's support for these house organizations. Hebrews 10:25 can be understood as counsel from the writer of Hebrews to believers to attend church wherever it met.

#### Evidence of House Churches in the Writings of the Church Fathers

Writings during the time of the early church provide evidence for the continued existence of house churches beyond the first century. Eusebius is of the opinion that the Christians were "not only excluded from public buildings, baths,

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<sup>1</sup>Glenn W. Barker, William L. Lane, J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 311.

and markets, . . . they were forbidden everywhere."<sup>1</sup> He mentions a tradition that, up to the time of Hadrian's seige, there existed in Jerusalem a very large Christian church which had been constructed by the Jewish Christians.<sup>2</sup> Eusebius comments on several church buildings erected at the time of Constantine. Notice his inciteful words:

But how can one describe those vast assemblies, and the multitude that crowded together in every city, and the famous gatherings in the houses of prayer; on whose account not being satisfied with the ancient buildings they erected from the foundation large churches in all cities?<sup>3</sup>

Lavish sums of money were spent on building churches throughout the land about the turn of the third century. The *Martyrdom of Justin* (A.D. 165) relates that Rusticus, the prefect of Rome, asked Justin in what place he had his followers assemble. Justin replied that he lived above a certain Martinus, and that those who wished came there to hear his teaching.<sup>4</sup> Justin also narrates that when Peter was in Tripoli, people wished to hear him preach. When he inquired for a suitable place to hold a discussion, a certain Maro offered his house saying,

I have a very spacious hall which can hold more than five hundred men, and there is also a garden within the house . . . . Then Peter said: 'Show me the hall, or the garden.' And when he had seen the hall, he went in to see the garden also; and suddenly the whole multitude, as if some one called them, rushed into the house, and thence broke through into the garden where Peter was already standing, selecting a fit place for discussion.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Eusebius, *Demonstratio Evangelica* 3:108, ed. G. Dindorf, *Eusebii Caesariensis Opera* (n. p., 1867) 3:188.

<sup>3</sup>Eusebius, "The Events which preceded the Persecution in our times," *NPNF*, 8:323-324.

<sup>4</sup>*Martyrdom of Justin Martyr* (ANF, 1:305).

<sup>5</sup>*Recognitions of Clement* 4.6 (ANF, 8:136).

It is also told that during this time private houses were set aside entirely for the work of the church. When Peter was in Antioch, according to the *Recognitions of Clement*, more than 10,000 men were baptized within seven days and thereupon,

Theophilus, who was more exalted than all the men of power in that city, with all eagerness of desire consecrated the great palace of his house under the name of the church, and a chair was placed in it for the apostle Peter by all the people; and the whole multitude assembled daily to hear his word.<sup>1</sup>

### **Archaeology Confirms House Church at Dura-Europos**

The hints made in early church writings of houses being used as churches are to a degree confirmed by archaeological discoveries. In 1921 archaeologists unearthed some fascinating ruins in Dura-Europos, a Roman border town in the Syrian desert along the Euphrates River. Located on the site of an earlier settlement, and known by the Aramaic name of Dura (a Seleucid fortress), it had been established around 300 B.C. and later came to be included in the Parthian Empire. In the second century A.D., a war erupted between Parthia and Rome, and Dura was taken by the Romans and made a part of the province of Syria. The ancient fortress received a Roman garrison in A.D. 167 and was maintained as an important stronghold on the Euphrates frontier. The city was captured in a battle in A.D. 256 and it is reported that Julian hunted lions among its ruins.<sup>2</sup>

The first digging at Dura-Europos was done by the British in 1921. The British army entrenched itself against the Arabs and quite by chance dug into these ruins. From 1928, a series of archaeological digs was carried out by Yale University

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., (ANF, 8:210).

<sup>2</sup>Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 493.

and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters. The ruins unearthed in those desert sands proves to be of interest to this study, for at the site were found what appears to be the remains of a house where a house church met in the third century A.D. Jack Finegan describes it as follows:

Probably this house belonged to a citizen of some means and standing, for it was somewhat larger than the average home at Dura. . . . From the street one entered by a little vestibule which turned into an inner paved court. Around this court was a series of rooms. . . . When the house was being built, soon afterward, someone pressed into the plaster a graffito which supplies the date of the building, the year A.D. 232-233.

One of the rooms in the house was used, probably from the first, as a Christian chapel. A few years later two other rooms were thrown together to provide a larger meeting place, accommodating about one hundred people having an elevated rostrum at one end for the speaker. . . . The greatest interest attaches to the small room known as the chapel. At its west end is a niche set against the wall with an arched roof resting on pillars. This contains a sunken receptacle which may have been a baptismal font.<sup>1</sup>

Churches were being built as early as 250 A.D. Constantine celebrated many of his victories by constructing large cathedrals, many on the very sites where earlier Christians celebrated worship in the simplicity of their own homes. By the fourth century, special buildings were erected for worship. This change came at this time for several reasons. The church was beginning to be recognized by the state and was no longer under severe persecution. Constantine proclaimed that ". . . it is right for Christians and all others to have freedom to follow the kind of religion they favored,"<sup>2</sup> that properties of the Christians should be restored to their rightful owners,<sup>3</sup> and that "some subsidy toward their expenses should be granted to certain specific ministers."<sup>4</sup> Some of Constantine's motives for building churches are revealed in his words:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 498-499.

<sup>2</sup>Bettenson, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 24.



Having thus embellished the city which bore his name, he next distinguished the capital of Bithania by the erection of a stately and magnificent church. . . . He also decorated the principal cities of the other provinces with sacred edifices of great beauty. . . . he consecrated to the service of God a church of unparalleled size and beauty. The entire building was encompassed by an enclosure of great extent, within which the church itself rose to a vast elevation, being of an octagonal form, and surrounded on all sides by many chambers, courts, and upper and lower apartments; the whole richly adorned with a profusion of gold, brass, and other materials of the most costly kind.<sup>1</sup>

A most dramatic shift from the former days of small house gatherings and quite a departure from the simplicity of the gospel presented by Jesus himself, this new political relationship brought about significant changes in ecclesiastical procedures. This change came in A.D. 313 at the time of the edict of Constantine and Licinius.<sup>2</sup>

Jackson points out that two factors within the church itself strongly affected church structure from this time: (1) the rise of the heresies and (2) the development of the hierarchial systems. It was determined that a building would be necessary to give protection to the church.<sup>3</sup> Schaff gives a profound summary of this period:

That the Christians in the apostolic age erected special houses of worship is out of the question, even on account of their persecution of Jews and Gentiles, to say nothing of their poverty; and the transition of a whole synagogue to the new faith was no doubt very rare. As the Savior of the world was born in a stable, and ascended to heaven from a mountain, so his apostles and their successors down to the third century, preached in the streets, the markets, on mountains, in ships, sepulchres, caves, and deserts, and in the homes of their converts. But how many thousands of costly churches and chapels have since been built and are constantly being built in all parts of the world to the honor of the crucified Redeemer, who in the days of his humiliation had no place of his own to rest his head!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Constantine *The Life of Constantine*, 3.50 (NPNF, 1:532).

<sup>2</sup>Bettenson, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>Jackson, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>Philip Schaff, "Sacred Places," *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 1:475.

The basilica replaced house gatherings. The simple format of worship was laid aside in favor of pomp and ceremony and the intimacy of the *domus ecclesia* was sacrificed for the sublime. Consequently, clergy and laity became separated from each other. The mysterious overpowered the humble fellowships, leaving house churches almost forgotten for centuries.

## CHAPTER V

### JOHN WESLEY REKINDLES HOUSE-CHURCH MOVEMENT

John Wesley, in addition to being a powerful preacher, introduced into his organization small-group activities by using bands, societies, and class meetings. These concepts were by no means original to Wesley; however, the configuration and timing have given to Wesley a degree of recognition for having used them.

#### Wesley the Preacher

Wesley was a remarkable man. Seventh-day Adventists, with some of their organizational structures stemming from Methodism, should better understand this powerful church leader of the eighteenth century. From the time he began his field preaching in 1739 until his death fifty years later, Wesley traveled some 225,000 miles and preached more than 40,000 sermons, some of them to crowds of over 20,000 people.<sup>1</sup> At his death, he left behind 72,000 Methodists in Great Britain and Ireland and a fledgling 57,000-member Methodist denomination in America.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John A. Knox, *Enthusiasm: A Chapter in the History of Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 423. See also Robert G. Tuttle Jr., *John Wesley: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 261.

<sup>2</sup>Robert G. Wearmouth, *Methodism and the Common People of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Epworth, 1945), pp. 177-78; John S. Simon, *John Wesley: The Last Phase* (London: Epworth, 1934), p. 319.

During his pastorate at Epworth, Samuel Wesley, John's father, organized a religious society whose intent was "first to pray to God; secondly, to read the Holy Scriptures and discourse upon religious matters for mutual edification; and thirdly, to deliberate about the edification of the neighbors."<sup>1</sup> Some of the exercises that the older Wesley fostered appear almost monastic. Howard Snyder, however, believes that the real impetus for small groups did not come from Samuel Wesley but rather from his wife, Susannah, John Wesley's mother.

In 1712, while Samuel, her husband, was away on an extended trip, she began a small meeting in the parsonage--an outgrowth of the family devotional time. The little group, numbering about 30 attendees at first, grew to over 200. Mrs. Wesley simply read a sermon, prayed and talked to the people.<sup>2</sup> When Samuel learned of this "private conventicle," he was greatly agitated. To think of a woman leading even a small meeting was too much for the pastor. John, as a young man still at home, would have heard his mother's defense.<sup>3</sup>

### Wesley and Small Groups

John Wesley's personal involvement in small groups developed further at Oxford University. Here, he and a number of colleagues began the strongly disciplined "Holy Club."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and the Oxford Methodists, 1725-35" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1972), pp. 7-8.

<sup>2</sup>John Whitehead, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: Stephen Couchman, 1793; Boston: Dow and Jackson, 1845), pp. 38-42.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 41-42. (Very strong letters of defense were written showing her husband that evening attendance had grown from 20-30 to over 300!)

<sup>4</sup>Howard A. Snyder, *The Radical Wesley* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1980), p. 18.

The members of the Club spent an hour, morning and evening, in private prayer. At nine, twelve and three o'clock they recited a collect, and at all times, they examined themselves closely, watching for signs of grace, and trying to preserve a high degree of religious fervor. They made use of pious ejaculations, they frequently consulted their Bibles, and they noted, in cipher [that is, coded] diaries, all the particulars of their daily employment. One hour each day was set apart for meditation. . . . They fasted twice a week, observed all the feasts of the church, and received the Sacraments every Sunday. . . . The Primitive Church, in so far as they had knowledge of it, was to be taken as their pattern.<sup>1</sup>

The feelings of other students on campus was not always supportive. In fact, the members of the group were scoffed at and ridiculed as religious fanatics. The appellation "Methodists" was in no way complimentary.

### Wesley's Contact with Moravians

In the fall of 1735, John and Charles Wesley sailed to North America. They were going to Georgia as missionaries. According to Wesley's diary, a violent storm hit them somewhere in the Atlantic. On board ship with them were a group of Moravians who were also sailing to North America. In his relationships with and observations of this deeply pious group of people at this time and later, Wesley came to change some of his positions on such vital doctrines as justification by faith. Stoeffler states that Wesley was influenced not only in theology but also in "ecclesiastical practice" as well.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, John Wesley was acquainted with the subject of righteousness by faith through Article 11 of the Articles of Religion of the Church of England.<sup>3</sup> However, it was the Moravian Peter Boehler who led him to an understanding of salvation on a personal level.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Wesley saw

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<sup>1</sup>C. E. Vulliamy, *John Wesley* (New York: Scribner, 1932), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>F. Ernest Stoeffler, *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 192.

<sup>3</sup>William A. Addison, *The Renewal of the United Brethren, 1722-1930* (London: SPCK, 1932), p. 51.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 189.

the simple structure of the Moravian religious society and the value of small, intimate bands.<sup>1</sup> The Moravians called such bands the *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*.<sup>2</sup> They were not exactly like the first century house churches; in fact, their intent was to preserve the mother church and to offer a manner of worship in which fellowship could happen within the larger body. Later, when he travelled to Germany to examine them firsthand, Wesley was much impressed with the Moravians and other German Pietists. Ernest Stoeffler had comments on Wesley's trip to Germany, calling it an "intentional study tour of Pietist centers." In Germany Wesley

. . . was not interested in learning any more about the nature of Moravian piety. . . . He had come to regard the life of faith which he had witnessed among the Moravians, and which he had now found himself, in the same light as did the Moravians . . . to them the corporate aspect of conscious renewal through "living faith" signified, as it were, a recapturing of the life of faith of the primitive Christian community. Their diaspora societies, therefore, were interpreted as nothing more and nothing less than a very much needed means of restoring *koinonia*, the spirit, the message, and the sense of mission of that community within a given religious establishment, and of so doing without the need of disrupting the order of that establishment. What his study-trip to the continent did for Wesley, then, was to afford him an opportunity to see the diaspora arrangement of the Moravians (as well as *collegia pietatis* of church related Pietism in general) in actual operation. Thus he now became fully aware of the possibilities of this arrangement for his work as he envisioned that work.<sup>3</sup>

In his own words, Wesley expresses his own conclusions about the visit:

During my remaining days at Herrnhut, I studied carefully the offices of the church and how the people were divided (especially their classes and bands).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Snyder, *Radical Wesley*, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

<sup>3</sup>*The Journal of Rev. John Wesley, A. M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Epworth, 1909-16; reprint. 1938), 1:482.

<sup>4</sup>Tuttle, *John Wesley: His Life and Work*, p. 212.

When he saw the peace and order, the spiritual life, the harmony and love of the Moravians, Wesley said, "I would gladly have spent my life here."<sup>1</sup>

### Collegia Pietatis

Just what were *collegia pietatis*? Sometimes referred to as *ecclesiolae*, *conventicles*, or *collegia philobiblica*, *collegia pietatis* were "study classes in piety" that were started in 1669 by Philipp Jakob Spener.<sup>2</sup> In principle, the *collegia pietatis*, which met on Mondays and Thursdays in Spener's home, were but an extension of the values of his catechetical activities. The nature of these gatherings can be discerned from the words of Spener himself:

I either repeated in summary fashion the sermon held the previous Sunday or repeated from the New Testament a few verses . . . and then the men present discussed these things without contention or disquiet. . . . All the people had free access to these exercises, often as many as the place would hold: nevertheless, the women were separated from the men so that the latter could not see them. The subject was at all times the text at hand. . . . Until 1762 exercises were established in this way in my house, but on advice of the city council and a special conference called by the rulers, they were moved to the church, although to be truthful, not without detriment, in that some of the middle class who had often spoken something for their own and other's edification in the house, ceased to speak in such a public place and thus a certain part of the previous fruitfulness was lost.<sup>3</sup>

### Societies

Wesley's converts in London wished to meet with him regularly, and he was ready to comply. As numbers increased, he quickly saw he could not visit them all individually in their homes, so he encouraged them all to come together every Thursday, evening, at which time he prayed and gave them the best advice he could. In reflection Wesley commented:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 12, 60.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

Thus arose, without any previous design on either side, what was afterwards called a Society; a very innocent name, but very common in London, for any number of people associating themselves together. . . . They, therefore, united themselves in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they might help each other to work out their salvation.

There is only one condition previously required in those who desire admission into this society--a desire to flee from the wrath to come and to be saved from their sins.<sup>1</sup>

This simple organizational structure sounds very similar in format to the *ecclesiolae in ecclesia* that Wesley had seen among the Moravians in Germany. Societies were not totally unknown in England either in that secular societies existed for political usage. Wesleyan societies were controlled directly by Wesley himself and united chiefly in his person.

### Bands

Another level of small-group organization used strongly by Wesley was the "Band." Of all his innovations, this is probably most directly traceable to Moravian influence. While on his visit at Herrnhut in 1738, Wesley had seen several "bands" functioning. He sensed that such small groups provided something that was missing in larger congregation. Wesley explains their need:

These, therefore, wanted some means of closer union; they wanted to pour out their hearts without reserve, particularly with regard to the sin which did easily beset them, and the temptations which were most apt to prevail over them. And they were the more desirous of this, when they observed it was the express advice of an inspired writer: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."

In compliance with their desire, I divided them into smaller companies, putting the married or single men, and married or single women together.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A. M.* (London: Wesleyan Methodist Bookroom, n.d.), 8:250. (Hereinafter cited as *Works*.)

<sup>2</sup>*Works*, 8:258.



### Class Meetings

The "class meeting," the next unit that came to be very typical in Methodist churches everywhere, was born in Bristol in 1742. Originally, the class meeting was held for the purpose of church discipline. It was a means by which Wesley could "make a particular inquiry into the behavior of those whom he saw weekly."<sup>1</sup>

At first the class leaders visited in the homes of the people, but for several reasons this proved to be too time consuming and somewhat complicated. Thus "upon all these considerations, it was agreed that those of each class should meet together. And by this means, a more full inquiry was made into the behavior of each person."<sup>2</sup> Wesley reflects upon the "class meeting."

It can scarcely be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to "bear one another's burdens," and naturally to "care for each other." As they had daily a more endeared affection for each other and speaking the truth they grew up into Him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ.<sup>3</sup>

This is a very insightful statement with profound meaning in our day. The small-group structure of the class meeting, originally organized for discipline, provided for the Wesleyan church an organizational system that would still be beneficial for the church today. Not only did Wesley clarify his own understanding of assurance and righteousness by faith through his interactions with the Moravians but in addition he observed the inner workings of the *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*. He saw in these small-group activities a means through which he could transmit and strengthen the spiritual disciplines and offer assurance to his members. The societies, bands, and

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<sup>1</sup>*Works*, 8:252-253.

<sup>2</sup>*Works*, 8:253.

<sup>3</sup>*Works*, 8:254.

class meetings that Wesley implemented gave the Methodist church a means to care for the spiritual needs of the church. Without this simple organizational structure, the Wesleyan movement may not have grown as rapidly as it did. And simple as this organizational method was, and no doubt copied from others, it became very useful to Methodism in its early functional structure.

Wesley's primary purpose in introducing small group activities into the Methodist Church was to provide a means for increasing spiritual discipline and piety. Perhaps present day church leaders can rediscover in Wesley's societies, bands, and class meetings a historical precedent and model. Some house-church enthusiasts certainly think so.

CHAPTER VI  
HOUSE CHURCHES IN EARLY  
ADVENTIST HISTORY

**Methodist Influence on Early Adventists**

John Wesley's influence was felt in early Adventism. Ellen Harmon and her family were Methodists,<sup>1</sup> and it was in a class meeting that she had testified about how she had experienced the love of Jesus and, "with glad expectation," looked forward to soon meeting her Redeemer.<sup>2</sup> In fact, this particular meeting was the last one she attended in that church.

When one reviews the history of the small class meeting of the Methodists, it is easy to understand why Ellen White attributed so much value to its use. It was in a similar small group, after the "great disappointment," that she received her first vision. She says:

I was visiting Mrs. Haines at Portland (Maine) , a dear sister in Christ, whose heart was knit with mine; five of us, all women, were kneeling quietly at the family altar. While we were praying, the power of God came upon me as I had never felt it before.<sup>3</sup>

The year before, in 1843, there had been a gathering of all "Advent"

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<sup>1</sup>Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1915), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 9 vols. (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1885-1909), 1(1885):37.

<sup>3</sup>White, *Life Sketches*, p. 64.

believers.<sup>1</sup> One of the most significant features of their two-day conference was its "social meeting," a time when those in attendance "could encourage one another through brief expressions of their personal faith in the imminent advent."<sup>2</sup>

In 1848 the so-called "Sabbath conferences" were held in private homes and barns of Albert Belden, Stockbridge Howland, and Otis Nichol. Only about fifty people attended these meetings. Joseph Bates and James and Ellen White were the principal speakers. Long hours were spent in prayer and earnest Bible study.<sup>3</sup>

### Early Adventist Meeting Places

In the early days of the Seventh-day Adventist movement, it was very common to worship on a Sabbath morning with fellow believers in the front room of their own homes. There was no reproach to such simple meeting places as a farm house,<sup>4</sup> a schoolhouse,<sup>5</sup> a carriage house, a large unfinished chamber, or swept-out barns,<sup>6</sup> but the places most regularly used were the private dwellings.<sup>7</sup> Ellen White reminisces about those early beginnings: "At first we assembled for worship

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<sup>1</sup>David Arthur, "Joshua V. Himes and the Cause of Adventism, 1839-45" (Master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1970), pp. 31-35, 102.

<sup>2</sup>R. W. Schwarz, *Light Bearers to the Remnant* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1979), p. 39.

<sup>3</sup>Arthur L. White, *Messenger to the Remnant* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1969), p. 28.

<sup>4</sup>C. Mervyn Maxwell, *Tell It to the World* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1977), p. 61; citing the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Aug. 27, 1861 and Nov. 20, 1883.

<sup>5</sup>Godfrey T. Anderson, *Outriders of the Apocalypse* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1972), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>Maxwell, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup>G. T. Anderson, p. 99.

and presented the truth to those who would come to hear in private homes, in large kitchens, in barns, groves, and in schoolhouses."<sup>1</sup>

Reports from the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*<sup>2</sup> substantiate house-church activities in those early days:

Aug. 27, 1861--The hall in which these discourses were preached was refused us, but a dwelling house was opened in which I spoke.<sup>3</sup>

Nov. 20, 1883--In 1850 my husband and myself visited Vermont, Canada, New Hampshire, and Maine. The meetings were held in private houses.<sup>4</sup>

Jan. 29, 1884--During the summer of 1848, meetings were held once in two weeks in some of the schoolhouses north of Rockport, or in the house of Brother Lamson.<sup>5</sup>

Oct. 14, 1884--On the Sabbath, the few friends here assembled in Edson's parlor for a Sabbath School. There are twelve persons in all who usually meet for worship. Edson conducts the Sabbath School when he is at home. After Sabbath School they either have a Bible reading or a prayer and social meeting.<sup>6</sup>

July 20, 1886--The church at Tramelan is not large, and their meetings are held at the houses of the brethren.<sup>7</sup>

Apr. 5, 1887--We left . . . to meet our appointment to speak to the people at the place of worship. The house was filled to its utmost.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ellen White, *Testimonies to Ministers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1923), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup>The *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* is the official organ of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. (Hereafter designated as *RH*.)

<sup>3</sup>E. G. White, "Meetings in Potten, C. E.," *RH*, Aug. 27, 1861, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup>Idem., "The Cause in Vermont," *RH*, Nov. 20, 1883, p. 377.

<sup>5</sup>Idem., "Reflections of the Past--No. 2," *RH*, Jan. 29, 1884, p. 395.

<sup>6</sup>Idem., "Notes of Travel," *RH*, Oct. 14, 1884, p. 467.

<sup>7</sup>Idem., "Among the Churches of Switzerland," *RH*, July 20, 1886, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup>Idem., "Visit to Tramelan," *RH*, Apr. 5, 1887, p. 125.

Oct. 23, 1888--According to previous appointment, a conference was held at the residence of the writer [Washington Morse].<sup>1</sup>

May 30, 1893--During the week, several evening meetings were held at the home of Father Hare.<sup>2</sup>

Further evidence of house church functions are also seen in the SDA missionary journal of the day, the *Signs of the Times*:

Feb. 13, 1879--Last Sunday we rode over bad roads to Cherry Mound to fill our appointment there at 11 o' clock. When we arrived, we found the people waiting, and ready to hear the words of truth. The house was packed. I had barely standing room.<sup>3</sup>

Jan. 12, 1882--Nov. 25, I left Oakland for Petaluma, and found a pleasant home with the family of Bro. Chapman. . . . On the Sabbath, I spoke with freedom to the little company. A social meeting followed. We realized that the Lord's presence is not confined to large assemblies, but that where two or three are gathered in His name, He meets with them.<sup>4</sup>

May 4, 1882--At the business meeting in Temperance Colony, a petition was handed in by the members of the church living in Fresno city and the vicinity to allow them the privilege of organizing a church by themselves. Their request was granted, and an appointment made to meet in the house of Bro. M. J. Church on Wednesday, April 26, at 3 p.m. On our return from the mountain, we filled this appointment, and a church of 14 members was organized in harmony with the doctrines and principles of S. D. Adventists. . . . Their Sabbath school numbers 26. A few others will join this church as soon as they get letters.<sup>5</sup>

Aug. 1, 1900--We plan to hold . . . house to house meetings and distribute literature.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Washington Morse, "Items of Advent Experience," *RH*, Oct. 23, 1888, p. 256.

<sup>2</sup>E. G. White, "Notes of Travel," *RH*, May 30, 1893, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup>Idem., "Texas," *Signs of the Times*, (hereafter designated *ST*), Feb. 13, 1879), p. 87.

<sup>4</sup>Idem., "Among the Churches," *ST*, Jan. 12, 1882, p. 274.

<sup>5</sup>Idem., "Fairview Church," *ST*, May 4, 1882, p. 274.

<sup>6</sup>Idem., "The Cause in Connecticut," *ST*, Aug. 1, 1900, p. 136.

To these early pioneers, "church" normally meant the group that met at their own homes, under their own roofs. Church buildings were not erected by Sabbath-keeping Adventists until 1855, and then only in Battle Creek, Michigan, and Buck's Bridge, New York. "When James White included a certain favorite Methodist hymn in his 1850 *Hymns for God's Peculiar People*, he left out the words 'on this thy day, in this thy house.'"<sup>1</sup> It was the exception rather than the rule to worship in a church building, for "church" to them was, in most cases, still in their own homes.

### Typical Worship Service

The typical early Adventist worship service of the 1850s and 1860s was relatively unstructured, consisting of hymns sung to the accompaniment of a pump organ (if the leading family were fortunate enough to own one) and the reading of Scripture and the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (the main denominational church paper) by local laity. Time was allowed for discussion and prayer and, "quite likely, a 'social meeting' was held during which the believers confessed their faults to one another and shared their faith."<sup>2</sup> For years this simple format of singing, reading Scripture, giving testimonies, and praying fulfilled the spiritual needs of those early Adventists.

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<sup>1</sup>Maxwell, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

### Social Meetings

The "social meeting" in homes appears to have been widely used among Adventists during this period.

Sabbath July 28, Brother Corliss was appointed to go to Seven Hills to meet with a little church in that place. . . . The meeting was held in a small private house. . . . He did not sermonize, but gave a Bible reading which interested the little flock. The people were called upon to read passages of Scripture and were thus instructed in the Word of God. . . . We then had a social meeting. This was a new experience to those who had newly come to the faith; but Elder Corliss called upon one after another to be witnesses for the Lord Jesus until all but one of the believers bore testimony. Although the social meeting is a new thing, yet they are learning in the school of Christ. . . . We keep before them the fact that the social meeting will be the best meeting in which they may be trained and educated to be witnesses for Christ.<sup>1</sup>

### Ellen White's Endorsements

It is clear that Ellen White strongly supported these small assemblies of humble "churches" meeting in private homes. She quoted Matt 18:20 (KJV): "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them," and added this caution:

Let not the little companies think that they can have no minister. Let them not think that one of their members must stand in the pulpit and preach to them. . . . The little company is to do service to God by offering to Him spiritual worship. When there is no delegated minister to speak to the little companies, let each one witness to the truth and be faithful to speak often to one another of the love of God and thus train and educate the soul.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ellen G. White, "Meeting at Seven Hills," MS. 32, 1894, Research Center, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Mich. Used by permission. "Social Meeting" is a recognized term among early Adventists. For further reading, see: Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* 2:277-282, 316, 419-420, 578-579; 4:70, 133; 5:108, 201, 423; 6:68, 69, 382, 437; 7:190; Idem., *Early Writings* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1945), pp. 114-118. Cf. *Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1962) for additional references. The idea was new to believers in Australia but not to those in the U.S.A. It had been in use there for 40 years there, having begun in 1850.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



White also gives a measure of support for the idea of small units in these comments:

I looked upon the little company who were newly come to the faith, and I said, 'My interests are identified with the interests of those precious souls. What possibilities and probabilities are before them! What deep and grave importance is attached to these little assemblies!' Jesus Christ has paid the ransom money of His own blood for their souls, and He is in the midst of them when they meet to worship God. The majesty of heaven identifies his interest with those of the believers, however humble may be their circumstances and wherever they are privileged to meet together.<sup>1</sup>

Later, in 1902, White once again had words of approval for small groups:

The formation of small companies as a basis of Christian effort has been presented to me by one who cannot err. If there is a large number in the church, let the members be formed into small companies. If in one place there are only one or two who know the truth, let them form themselves into a band of workers.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the early Adventist leaders were content to conduct the church in the very modest circumstances of their own homes. They understood the dynamics of such activities as the social meeting and urged people to participate in them. This is not to say that there were no church buildings in early Adventism church, for there certainly were. What is important to this report is that in the primitive stages of the Adventist church, the pioneers had no difficulty living with simplicity and humility. They met in their homes because of their lack of means. This willingness on their part seems to say something--that is , that the church, even as it met that met in their homes, was for that time perfectly acceptable.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 7:21-22.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONTEMPORARY HOUSE CHURCH THEORIES AND EXPERIMENTS

The two decades of the 1970s and 80s have seen much renewed fervor for house churches. Several reasons can be suggested for these experiments. Some small groups were born out of the personal-identity movement: others had a desire for spiritual rebirth. In the story of China, the development of house churches was absolutely necessary for survival. A few maverick house groups have arisen in Protestant churches and have been strongly condemned by their parent organizations. This chapter examines several recent house-church theories and experiments in the United States, China, and Korea.

#### House Church: A Response to Man's Sociological Needs

In the early 1970s, the *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* carried a series of articles presenting the house-church theories of Philip and Phoebe Anderson, Horace McMullen, and Arthur L. Foster. These writers saw a cultural shift taking place in America around 1950 from a "survival society"<sup>1</sup> to an "identity society." Sociologically, people were beginning to search for identity, meaning, and relatedness. The Human Potential Movement was just getting underway and was receiving strong acceptance. This cultural change brought with it special problems

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur L. Foster, "The House Church: Context and Form," *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 61 (1970):21.

for the church. How could the church deal with pluralism, society's dwindling interest in church matters, and a highly mobile society? In an attempt to re-establish the meaning of self-hood, the house-church idea was introduced as "a form of social education."<sup>1</sup>

The term "house church" was defined by Foster as follows:

The word "house" is chosen to communicate the quality of intimacy, informality and at-homeness that one associates with being in his own house or that of a good friend. . . . The term 'house' then points to a quality of face-to-face interaction rather than to any particular location. The word "church" is chosen to show our identity with the historical community of the Christian Church and to indicate that while we are deeply indebted to the recent innovations in group dynamics, group therapy, and encounter groups for normal persons, we consider ourselves to have translated these learnings into categories of church and ministry.<sup>2</sup>

An expanded view of house churches is presented by Foster in *The House Church Evolving*. He sees a house church as an intentional community within the context of a larger church, as "a process whereby a group of fifteen to twenty . . . meet together for mutual healing, sustaining, and guiding of its members, for celebration, fellowship, and mobilizing . . . for service."<sup>3</sup> These small groups have some distinct characteristics: (1) They are for short duration, (2) they meet in a semicircle, (3) there is a strong commitment to the group, and (4) the communication is very intimate, open, and usually includes total disclosure.<sup>4</sup> A covenant made in the group usually lasts, at most, for six to nine months.<sup>5</sup> The entire purpose of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Philip A. Anderson, "Building a Faith-Trust Community," *Chicago Theological Register* 63 (1973): 12-17.

<sup>5</sup>Foster, p. 3. Cf. also Philip A. Anderson and Phoebe Anderson, *The House Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), p. 48.

these meetings is to build trust relationships. The individual passes through four stages:

1. *Trust*--The beginning of growth.
2. *Struggle*--Telling the story, the releasing of oneself.
3. *Awareness*--The person in his struggle suddenly sees and feels himself in a new way.
4. *Actualization*--Where the proof comes of whether change has taken place.<sup>1</sup>

Actually, it is difficult to see much difference between this description and those for sensitivity groups, transactional analysis, and encounter groups so popular during the same period. W. Widick Schroeder concurs in his critique of the Anderson-Foster experiment.<sup>2</sup> He sees them pursuing the house church as a fellowship as opposed to church as an institution. He also finds that "the influence of humanistic psychology is very evident among the practitioners of the house church movement."<sup>3</sup> While it may be true that this sociological approach accomplished some of its desired goals, it appears that it fell short of what church really is meant to be. Judging from the Chicago theological group's own evaluation instrument,<sup>4</sup> it seems that their goals were limited primarily to establishing an individual's self worth, thus equipping him to live in the world and witness to it. The long-range effects of this approach seem to be limited and would probably be regarded by

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<sup>1</sup>Anderson and Anderson, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>"A Sociological and Theological Critique of the House Church Movement," in *The House Church Evolving*, ed. Arthur L. Foster (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1976), p. 53-58.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>4</sup>Anderson and Anderson, pp. 137-138. The items are as follows:  
 1. I trust the persons of this house church. (1-7). 2. This house church is doing and being what I want it to do and be. (1-7). 3. I feel the support of the house church. (1-7). 4. I feel responsible for the leadership of this house church. (1-7). 5. My willingness to disclose myself to the house church is low or high. (1-7). 6. My feelings are misunderstood or understood. (1-7). 7. My sense of worth in the house church has been belittled or enhanced. (1-7)

many as merely one more promotional gimmick to stir up an otherwise lethargic church.

### **Ecumenikos: An Ecumenical Approach to Kansas City, Missouri**

Ecumenikos is a five-denomination, new-style church on the growing western edge of Kansas City, Missouri. It began in 1972 as an attempt to develop a significant approach to suburban needs. A team of three ministers was chosen to begin this church which represents the United Methodist, United Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and the Mennonite denominations. It was decided early that the house church model would best facilitate the desires of this ecumenical body. Ambitions for reaching the unchurched were high and, for a time in its early stages, the church contacted hundreds of people.<sup>1</sup>

It is significant to look at Ecumenikos (1984) after twelve years of operation. According to Jim Crabtree, an attorney, the original dreams of the house-church movement have not materialized. Working with five judicatory boards has proved to be a nightmare. People typically attended the small house churches for a short time only, then, for theological or personal reasons, drifted back to the mainline denominations.

At the time of this report (1984), the emphasis of Ecumenikos was almost entirely slanted toward social issues. Members were activists in the peace movements and community-relief organizations, and they operated a collective store in Argentina, a section of Kansas City.

One idea they pursued was "proximity living," where six families lived in the same house and shared a common room for eating and social activities. They

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<sup>1</sup>Jim Crabtree, attorney co-lay pastor of Ecumenikos, interview held in Kansas City, Missouri, September 1984.

even shared a common bank account! The obvious potential for moral irregularities that such a setting presents has apparently never materialized.

Several groups of families met during the week, some early in the morning over coffee and others at night. No regular Sunday meeting was held and no provision was made for children's meetings. Children sat with the adults in their discussions. Crabtree described their worship services thus:

In a typical meeting we all come together with some type of call to worship. Last week may have been a typical meeting. Judy danced a call to worship. We then sang songs and had a confessional type prayer, followed by the sharing of joys and concerns. . . . We then sang a song, then it was input time, we discussed the topic of the inhumanity of man at Nagasaki and Hiroshima.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to see that most of what Ecumenikos did in the way of worship was done in a celebratory style.

Total attendance in all their home gatherings averaged between forty to sixty people. What began as a grandiose idea of Ecumenism failed. Their mission was nothing more than an attempt to meet social needs, since no evangelistic outreach was going on. The group's main satisfaction seems to come from putting \$3,000 to \$4,000 into an emergency fund each month. While their effort to form a strong social welfare organization was commendable enough, it fell lamentably short of the gospel commission and of the groups' original objectives.

### **Households of Faith in China**

One of the saddest chapters in Christian missions is the fiasco that took place in China after the Communist take-over. The church was devastated. Properties were nationalized, missionaries were sent home, and national leaders

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

disappeared into the fabric of Chinese society. Westerners feared that Christianity in China was dead!

What did the Communist take-over and the later Cultural Revolution (1960s) do to the Christian church in China? For twenty-five years, information coming out of mainland China was meager at best; what little was known suggested that nothing was left of old structures. Then came the shift in political relationships between the People's Republic of China and the rest of the world initiated by President Nixon and the Chinese premier, Chou En Lai. Tensions eased and communication was re-established between Christians in the west and Christians in China. The news from China is breath-taking; Christianity and the church in China have never been stronger.

Raymond W. M. Fung, a Chinese Christian still living in China, reported to the World Council of Churches in October 1980 that he personally knew of "42 grassroots Christian communities in China, spread over 11 provinces."<sup>1</sup> Fung calls these "grassroots Christian communities" and not "house churches" because of the diversification of groups he found and studied. One of these communities considered itself part of a broad fellowship of some 400 communities in three southern provinces. *Households of Faith on China's Soil* reports on fourteen of these groups.<sup>2</sup> Fung concludes:

1. Perhaps the single most obvious conclusions about Christianity in China today is that it is Chinese.

2. As regards the mode or structure of that existence, . . . there is as yet no clear indication. We do not know what kind of church the Christian church in China is going to be like. We have little idea of where

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond Fung, *Households of Faith on China's Soil* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982), pp. ix-x.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. x-xi.

it is heading. All we know is that the church in China exists, and exists with vigor and determination.<sup>1</sup>

Most of the groups described by Fung would, from an American perspective, qualify as house churches. The groups are small, sometimes with as few as four members,<sup>2</sup> though occasionally reaching more than 200. One simple Chinese lady when asked what the church meant to her replied, "A church is a family of Christians witnessing, serving, and of course, worshipping together."<sup>3</sup>

The official Protestant religious organization in China today is the "Three Self-Patriotic Movement." This group is structured and has a definite leadership.<sup>4</sup> However, the strongest force by far is the lay group which has no real structure. Speaking of Adventism, one of Fung's informers says that "there is no more an Adventist Church. There is an Adventist tradition, but it is one church."<sup>5</sup> He describes how some Adventists face the matter of the Sabbath:

We explained our Seventh-day Adventist practice, and also our desire to worship with other Christians. . . . Given the many problems, we decided eventually to have a second service on Saturday at five, early in the evenings and a Sunday service beginning at twelve noon. Rev. Yeong would continue to lead the original Saturday service. . . . At the moment, all three services are doing fine.<sup>6</sup>

Whoever the informer was, it is obvious that he is not a solid member in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, not with his liberal ecumenical views. One of the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 80-83.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 16.



persons interviewed by Fung, complained that they "did not feel at home with his Adventist style."<sup>1</sup>

Christianity in China was saved by the simple, informal, unstructured house church. When the rest of the world concluded that all its investments, organization, and denominations were a total loss, the church survived in simplicity. One thing is certain--while the movement is an "underground church," it is alive and vibrant.<sup>2</sup> It is a church firmly rooted in the motherland, possibly unstructured as far as the rest of the world regards the church, but a church that is definitely on the move.

### **House Cell Groups in Seoul, Korea**

Paul Yonggi Cho's church in Seoul, Korea, is one of the best-known success stories of the modern church growth movement.<sup>3</sup> Cho's phenomenal and effective program of today was born out of frustration and poor health. He was frustrated with a very ineffective church structure. Cho studied the book of Acts and the Pauline epistles, and as he did so he came to believe that the Holy Spirit was hammering into his mind the phrase, "church in the home." A new and daring plan began to form. He would turn the work of the ministry over to the faithful "shepherds" who would establish house groups (cells) in their neighborhoods. They would do the teaching, administering, counseling, praying for the sick, and visiting. Unfortunately, the idea did not meet with the immediate support of his board of deacons. In fact, there was total apathy. Finally, he and his mother-in-law decided that women would be able to do this work. His mother-in-law gathered about sixty

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>3</sup>Paul Yonggi Cho, *Successful Home Cell Groups* (Plainfield, N. J.: Logos, 1981), pp. 18-19.

of the most suitable and trustworthy candidates for the role of church-in-the-home shepherds.<sup>1</sup> The use of women in church leadership was largely foreign to Korean and Eastern cultural norms. It was very difficult for Cho himself to accept the idea, but he says he heard a distinct voice say to him, "My way is to use the women,"<sup>2</sup> and use the women he did. Cho began printing his sermons and giving them to the women to read in their house groups. By the end of 1964 eighty-five house groups were functioning with as many shepherds in full operation; membership in his original church had grown to 3,857. It is interesting to follow the phenomenal growth spurt that came with his new concept of church. Figure 1 graphically depicts what happened in the Yoido Island Full Gospel Church. Cho, in describing his church, says:

I like to describe Full Gospel Central Church as the smallest church in the world as well as the biggest church in the world. It is the biggest because our congregation numbers 150,000 people (1981). But it is the smallest church in the world--every member is part of a home cell group.<sup>3</sup>

House-church advocates around the world proudly hold up the Korean example as a model of what happens when special characteristics of house church are put to work. There is no secret as to how it happens. Cho explains:

Home cell groups are living cells, and they function much like the cells in the human body. In a living organism the cells grow and divide. Where there was one cell, there become two. Then there are four, then eight, then sixteen, and so forth.<sup>4</sup>

In March of 1986, the membership of Cho's church was 504,250. There are

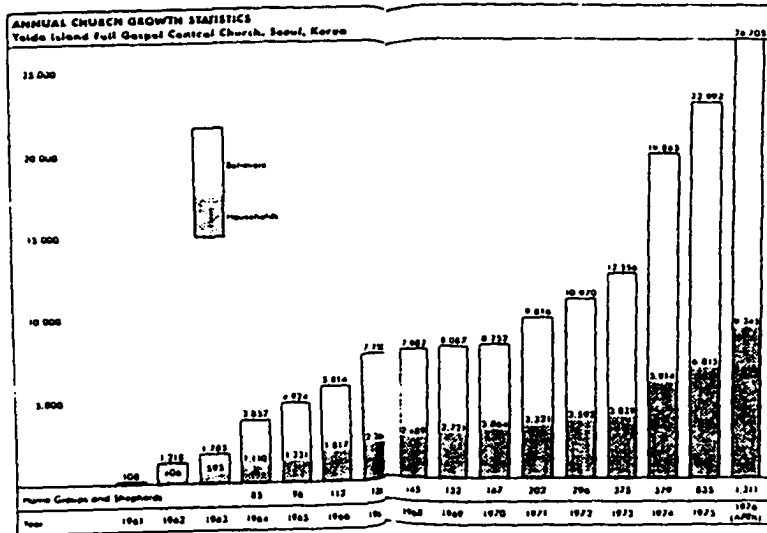
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<sup>1</sup>Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughan, and David J. Seifert, *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1982), p. 62.

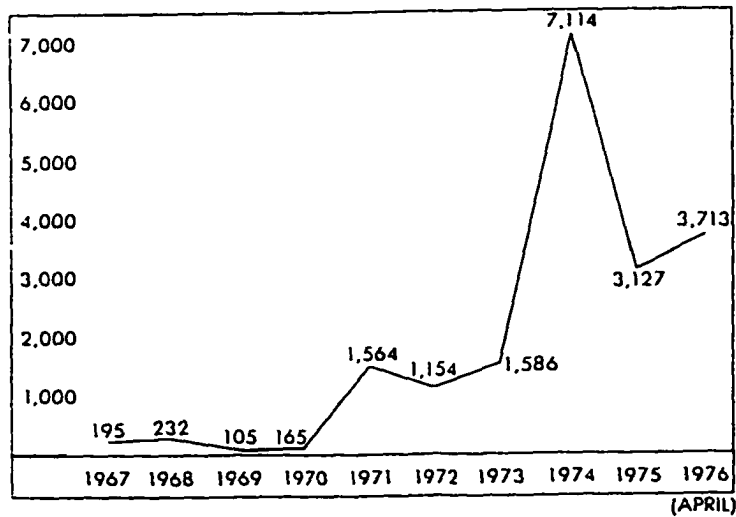
<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>3</sup>Cho, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.



Annual Church Growth Statistics



Annual Additions to the Church

Figure 1. Yoido Island Full Gospel Central Church, Seoul, Korea.

SOURCE: Elmer L. Towns, John N. Vaughn, and David J. Seifert. *The Complete Book of Church Growth* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1982), pp. 64, 66.

seven services conducted simultaneously every Sunday in as many languages.<sup>1</sup> The key to the phenomenal growth taking place in the Yoido Island Full Gospel Central Church is directly attributed to the powerful input of the laymen leading their neighborhood churches in their homes. Cho divided the city of Seoul into seventeen districts, and further subdivided his membership into "little churches," as he calls them. Each small cell consists of fifteen to twenty-five people and in this small-group context the Yoido Full Gospel Church obtains its strength for intimate worship, fellowship, and training.<sup>2</sup> Cho and his house groups, while they enjoy immensely the convivial atmosphere of the homes, believe that they have a much higher goal than just fellowship; their goal is to reach all of Korea for Christ.

Cho's success in Korea seems to defy Korean culture, which adamantly opposes the presence and involvement of women. How and why has he--and they--succeeded? Normally women in the Orient are held in low esteem. Cho came along and offered these neglected women an opportunity for exposure, leadership, and a sense of accomplishment. The women saw an opportunity to serve and they responded, "No one has ever trusted us like this" they said, and accepted the opportunity for service. Here is an example of how sociology assisted the spread of the gospel. Cho's church has grown, but it should be remembered that it is a Pentecostal church and Pentecostal churches are growing everywhere. Cho's church is not a house church, not by the definition of this thesis. However, his church does use some of the dynamics found in house churches, for as this thesis defines a house church, in order to be a house church, it must be a free standing, organized

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<sup>1</sup>Information from *Yoido Island Church Bulletin*, March 1986 (the day I attended the church).

<sup>2</sup>Towns, Vaughn, and Seifert, *The Complete Book of Church Growth*, p. 61.

congregation where membership resides and worship takes place. This is not the case in Seoul.

**"Church without Walls"  
Scotsdale, Arizona**

One of the pioneers in the current house-church movement is Robert C. Girard, a Methodist minister formerly connected with the Arizona Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in America.<sup>1</sup> Moving to his new district in Scotsdale, Arizona, in the 1960s, he found a typically apathetic congregation going through its regular routines. Through good programs and leadership, his church grew to 250 members and achieved what he called the "glorious Evangelical Status Quo." Frustrated with the rut he was in, he began to pray, "Lord, please build a new church in Scotsdale and, Lord, build it your way." Little did he anticipate the revolution that followed.

Girard came to the conclusion that growth would not take place within the confines of the organized church. There was just too much against it, too many "barnacles" from the past still clinging to the old institutional-church concept. In his own words, there was:

Too much emphasis on buildings and budgets. Too much money needed just to keep the machinery running.

Too much pastoral and lay effort spent on oiling the gears of the organization.

Too much energy expended keeping touchy members happy because you can't afford to lose them.

Too much dependence on the pastor. Too many comfortable pews all facing the front so no one has to relate to anyone else.

Too much government. Too many man-made standards. Too much holding one another at arm's length.

Too little real fellowship--gut level fellowship--inner circle fellowship.

Too many reports to fill out.

Too little time to enjoy life.

Too little time to know God.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert C. Girard, *Brethren Hang Loose* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972); idem, *Brethren Hang Together* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979).

Too little time with the family.  
Too little time to pray.<sup>1</sup>

Girard concluded that there must be a better way and set out to find it.

Girard said there were three things that impressed him during his quest that became catalysts in his search for change. First was the book, *What Shall This Man Do?*<sup>2</sup> by Watchman Nee. From this Girard learned the meaning of the mystical "body of Christ." Second, Ian Thomas showed him how Christ's life transforms the Christian life and ministry.<sup>3</sup> Finally, he read an article by Larry Richards entitled "Twentieth Century Reformation"<sup>4</sup> which demonstrated the place and importance of the family unit, growth cells in the congregation. These three things drastically altered Girard's understanding of "church." He came to the conclusion that the work of God in the church must be done by Christ and the Holy Spirit, not by the minister. He saw that the people must look to Jesus as the true head of the church, not to the minister--whom Girard called the "great father," the "all spiritual high-priest," the one man "whirling dervish," "spiritual tornado," and the "little tin-god."<sup>5</sup> He also concluded that "church," in order to be church, must be released from the confines of a building. Through his research he discovered that

Every major spiritual awakening in the last two thousand years was accompanied spontaneously or by design, by the huddling of tiny cells of

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<sup>1</sup>Girard, *Brethren Hang Loose*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>2</sup>Watchman Nee, *What Shall This Man Do?* (Fort Washington, Pa.: Christian Literature Crusade, 1967).

<sup>3</sup>Ian Thomas, *The Saving Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974).

<sup>4</sup>Larry Richards, *A New Face for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), pp. 26-38.

<sup>5</sup>Girard, *Brethren Hang Loose*, p. 91.

Christians, away from the institutional church to study the Bible, pray, and minister to one another.<sup>1</sup>

With these convictions, Girard set out to "build" the Church without Walls.

"For many years now, Our Heritage Church of Scotsdale, Arizona, has been on its pilgrimage. It began as a mission of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in America," wrote Pat Elfresh, a reporter for the Scotsdale press, in a January 1979 feature article. Among other things she said:

A Scotsdale congregation is giving up its building and property to become a "church without walls," changing to what members believe is a New Testament directed move to "house churches." Instead of gathering on Sundays and midweek at the church, the 130 members of Our Heritage Church, formerly a Wesleyan Methodist congregation, will attend one of three "house church" locations in Valley homes, getting together for monthly "reunion" meetings elsewhere. . . . This past week that final move was made out of the facility at 4640 N. Granite Reef Road. . . . The congregation has become "denominationally independent," Girard said, using that term after the congregation was disassociated from the denomination, charged with being too far away from the "Wesleyan norm," according to a letter from the district superintendent. The property the congregation is leaving is valued at approximately \$230,000 and will be turned over to the Wesleyan denomination's area offices.<sup>2</sup>

The newspaper gave an overview of what was about to take place by printing a copy of this church newsletter from Our Heritage Church:

On Sunday, January 7, 1979, we shall begin meeting weekly in several "house churches." From that date on, by deliberate choice, we shall no longer meet at 4640 N. Granite Reef Road.

### Characteristics of the House Churches

a. Geographical location. Body members will be urged to join the nearest house church, but there will be freedom for each person or family to choose.

b. Team leadership. Each house church will be shepherded by a carefully selected team of pastors, teachers and elders and others who are gifted by the Spirit. Team members of all the house churches will meet

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>2</sup>Lawrence O. Richards and Clyde Hoeldke, *A Theology of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 359-361.

weekly for mutual discipling and for sharing and praying concerning the needs of each house church and the larger body.

c. Sunday afternoon and/or evening meeting time. A time frame allowing development of greater freedom of thinking, attitudes, and meeting style.

d. Participative meeting style. Similar to our present Sunday meetings. Planned to include singing, worship, sharing, and teaching of the Word.

e. The shape of a family. The body will be encouraged by its setting to see itself as a family and will be stimulated by its structure to live as a family.

f. Closer personal relationships. Both locality and size will contribute to greater concentration on developing significant relationships with people.

g. Complete duplicatable structure. This simple, dynamic church can be developed in any neighborhood without financial or professional limitation . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Not everyone, of course, accepted this new philosophy of church. The following letter of resignation was written by one of the former members:

This letter is written to inform you that we will no longer hold any office at Our Heritage Church. This is not a matter to be taken lightly nor is it so considered. After considerable discussion with our family and deep prayer with the Lord, we find that we cannot hold office in a church whose "goals" we find unacceptable. If these "goals" are not the Lord's will, then we want no part of them. In any event, after much prayerful consideration, we find that it is impossible to devote our efforts to that end. We will pray that the direction "Our Heritage" has chosen will prove to be the Lord's will and result in winning more people to Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Two final letters sent from headquarters made disassociation clear. The following excerpt was taken from a letter to Robert Girard by the General Superintendent of the Western Administration Area of the Wesleyan Church:

Dear Brother Girard:

It was with great regret that I received the announcement of the plan for voluntary withdrawal from the Wesleyan Church of the pastor and the members of Our Heritage Church for the purpose of establishing another type of organization as you pointed out in your correspondence. . . . I had hoped after our conversation at last Conference time that you and the people there would move to the "Wesleyan norm" of church operations and practices. . . . The kind of relationship you requested for the group does not appear to be proper. . . . I am assured the members of the Arizona District Board of Administration as well as the members of the District are

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 361-363.

<sup>2</sup>Girard, *Brethren Hang Loose*, p. 105.



disappointed in the developments. They are a great group and they will be fair and Christian in their future relationship with you.<sup>1</sup>

Robert Girard lost his credentials from the Wesleyan Methodist Church in early 1979; however, in July 1979 he was re-instated in regular standing with his denomination and granted full fellowship with the California District of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in America.

In a personal letter to the author, dated October 2, 1986, Girard gives a brief overview as to what has taken place with the house church, formerly known as "Our Heritage Church," since 1979. He states that eventually five small house churches were started from the initial church. Two of those have been terminated, and three remain. Not one of the three churches has built any buildings. Several of the original members have returned to traditional denominational congregations. Presently, Girard is serving a small community church about ninety miles from Scotsdale. An interesting comment appears in Girard's letter:

House churches are not a panacea. They can be bad and ineffective and spiritually dishonest just like big churches can be. But if they are on the track, they can . . . be vehicles for real spiritual growth. They have to guard against self-centeredness and self-satisfaction. They have to, I think, work harder to stay in with the rest of the body of Christ, so as not to drift into error. But if we face the risks, the discipleship potential is far more readily realized.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Alternative Parish of the Unification Church**

The Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of the World Christianity, now widely known as the Unification Church or "Moonies," has recently begun encouragement the use of house churches. It sees the home as the lowest level of

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<sup>1</sup>Richards and Hoeldtke, pp. 363-364.

<sup>2</sup>Robert C. Girard to Charles J. Griffin, Oct. 2, 1986.

social structure and as essential for developing a base for social change. What do the Unificationists mean when they speak about a "house church"?

According to Joseph H. Fichter, "The purpose of the Unificationist house church is neither to provide a place of worship nor to build a local spiritual community";<sup>1</sup> rather, it is a means through which salvation or grace can flow to the world. In the Unification religion, the family lineage is very important. Very few singles are in the church, for Moon himself sees to it that a spouse is chosen for each adherent. Salvation is perceived as coming through the blessed parents. The house church, then, in Moon's belief, is

to administer to the needs of the people, to offer voluntary and friendly assistance to all individuals and families of the neighborhood. The Unification home church is not a building to which parishioners come for prayer and fellowship. The home church goes to the people, all the residents in an area of about four city blocks, containing 360 household units.<sup>2</sup>

The four city blocks become a territorial assignment for the house church. If the house church is on a university campus, then the same principle applies to blocks of students.

The ultimate dream is to have a network of these all over the world. Reverend Moon has said, "home church is our destiny." It is not a witnessing technique like reaching people on the street or inviting them to a meal or a lecture. The home church is much deeper than this because it is integral to the building of God's kingdom on earth. It is really the future direction of human destiny in the divine plan. If there had been no sin in the Garden of Eden, if Adam and Eve had not fallen, theirs would have been the first home church. They would have grown to perfection with God as partner of their marriage and family. As their children multiplied into a tribe and then into a nation, every God-centered family would have been a home church.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph H. Fichter. "Home Church: Alternative Parish," In *Alternatives to American Mainline Churches*, pp. 179-199. Edited by Joseph H. Fichter (Barrytown, N.Y.: Rose of Sharon Press, 1983), p. 180.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 195.

The Unification conceptual framework of church is synonymous with the family. When they say church, they mean the family and vice-versa. Their emphasis, according to Moon, is and always will be

. . . centered upon the family, . . . the basic unit of heavenly society. . . .  
The family will always be the basic unit of happiness and cornerstone of the kingdom of God on earth and thereafter in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

In the final analysis, the house church to the followers of Moon is seen as the manifestation of the divine program for the restoration of humanity.<sup>2</sup> In the Moonie organization there is tight central control. The house church used by the Moonies may sound somewhat independent, but they are not. Their organization would be very similar to those found in Korea and therefore are not house churches according to the definition used in this project.

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<sup>1</sup>As told to Frederich Sontag, *Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), p. 157. More recently Moon said that "in the future, our organization will become completely home church. National leaders, center leaders--everyone--will do home church work. Thus, the era of mobile activity will draw to a close, and everyone will settle down." "Home Church Alternative Parish," *Today's World* 9 (1981):16.

<sup>2</sup>Sun Myung Moon, *Divine Principle* (New York: Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, 1973), p. 124.

## CHAPTER VIII

### **THE BERRIEN SPRINGS, MICHIGAN, SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST HOUSE CHURCH**

A Seventh-day Adventist group in Berrien Springs, Michigan, began a house church which they have called Home Church. The church currently (1983) meets in a public building located on S. Mechanic Street overlooking the St. Joseph river, the dam, and Lake Chapin.

#### **The Need of Another Church**

Home Church began in November 1976 as an attempt to provide an alternative form of worship near Andrews University. From the beginning of the school year, church leaders and university officials had been looking for a solution to the overcrowded conditions at Pioneer Memorial Church (PMC), the large campus church. Two solutions seemed most feasible: (1) alternate services in the residence halls and (2) supervised services in faculty homes. The decision to allow alternate services was difficult, since local church leadership felt strongly that the Andrews community should meet for worship as a single body. At the time Thomas Geraty, a faculty member at Andrews, met John McLarty, a seminarian who had strong convictions about ministry to the youth at Andrews University. In warmer weather, McLarty had led out in beach vespers on Friday nights. With the arrival of cold weather, the mission shifted from a beach ministry to the beginnings of a house church. John talked to Chester Damron, AU Campus Ministries Director and an

associate pastor of PMC, about the possibility of starting a worship project in connection with the Seminary Field Practicum class. Working alongside McLarty in forming the church were Bill Poole, a fellow seminarian, his friend, Kathy Geraty, and Debbie Lloyd. Through Kathy, the group met Thomas Geraty and began meeting in his home.

### **The Establishment of the House Church**

According to McLarty, there were three factors that prompted the beginning of the house church: (1) the desire to provide meaningful worship services for young people who had quit attending church at PMC, (2) the need for a more intimate worship community, and (3) a community that encouraged greater participation in worship.

McLarty describes the first services as consisting of Bible study, singing (gospel songs and choruses), and prayer. In fact, the informal setting more closely resembled a branch Sabbath School than the worship service at PMC.<sup>1</sup>

Attendance grew largely through personal invitation. The group avoided public advertising because they did not want to attract novelty seekers. McLarty's beach ministry had put him in touch with a large number of disenchanting Adventists and these he invited to the church. Other members of the house church invited those they met who had spiritual needs, and everyone invited friends who they thought would strengthen the ministry of the church. Slowly, Home Church grew.

In the beginning, a leadership vacuum existed. With very little in the way of structure and organization, leadership, like cream, had to rise to the top. Most

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<sup>1</sup>Dean Bruington and Tim Crosby, eds., *Home Is Where the Heart Is* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Duplicating and Printers, 1978), p. 2. This is an unpublished document, but a copy can be found in Heritage Room, James White Library, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

members assumed that McLarty was the leader. Perhaps all but McLarty himself recognized this assumption. He later commented on his "election":

Most of the members seemed to assume that I was sort of the leader. . . . One Sabbath the whole church service seemed to fall apart. We talked in circles and became quite argumentative. During the week I called nearly all the members to find out how they felt about the services and leadership of the church. Everyone seemed to be looking to me as leader while I was trying not to lead. Hence there was confusion. After much prayer and deliberation I stood up the next Sabbath and said, self-consciously and with great timidity, "I'm going to be the leader."<sup>1</sup>

Several months after McLarty had declared himself "pastor," Thomas Geraty described McLarty as an "intern with PMC" who was working closely with Chester Damron on the pastoral staff of PMC. In actuality, Home Church had little connection with PMC during the first half of 1977 other than the fact that McLarty sent monthly reports on Home Church activities to Pastor Damron.<sup>2</sup>

A later development in the leadership was a tripartite pastorate. John McLarty led out in worship and acted as the official "buckstopper"; Doug Griffin was elected pastor in charge of building "community" and tending to the spiritual needs of the members; George Gainer was elected as pastor in charge of outreach. In May of 1978, the three leaders were replaced with one pastor, Dean Bruington.<sup>3</sup>

Under Bruington's leadership, Home Church began to grow somewhat less provincial in its viewpoint and became more concerned about relations with institutional structures. Bruington was a personal friend of John Kroncke, senior pastor of PMC at the time, and he did much to promote unity between the two churches. By the end of his pastorate, Bruington had been ordained as an elder at

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 3

<sup>2</sup>Douglas Griffin, tape recorded evaluation of the Berrien Springs, Michigan, Seventh-day Adventist Home Church. He served as pastor in the 1970s. Home Church was affected by off-shoot movements like Desmond Ford and others.

<sup>3</sup>Bruington and Crosby, p. 13.

PMC and had established tentative organizational ties between PMC and Home Church.

The next pastor, Donn Leatherman, served once again in a triple ministry with Warren Ruf and Wayne Kablanow. Leatherman was named first among equals. Assignment of responsibilities was based on individual gifts rather than upon pre-specified separate functions.

Jim Miller was alone when I arrived at Home Church on Sabbath, February 26, 1983. It was 9:30 a.m. At 10:20, five college students arrived, and Jim said, "I guess we can start Sabbath School now." The room was arranged very informally, with chairs and sofas in a semicircle and a piano by the window. The girls took off their shoes and put on little white socks kept there for the purpose (presumably to keep their feet warm). Everyone sat on the floor and sang Joni Erickson songs. Miller led out in the Sabbath School lesson, the subject being "The Suffering Saviour," from the Collegiate quarterly.<sup>1</sup>

Home Church did not maintain a membership record. Most of those who attended held membership at PMC. Anyone who attended several times and wished to do so, could consider himself a member. The closest thing to a membership list was the Home Church telephone directory which, when first compiled, contained the names, addresses, and telephone numbers of the "regular" members, that is, anyone who wanted to be included.

### **Relationship of Home Church to Pioneer Memorial Church**

During the time Home Church met in his home, Thomas Geraty was the chief liaison between the group and PMC. He wrote the formal letters of explanation

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<sup>1</sup>Jim Miller, Interview, Berrien Springs, Michigan, S. D. A. Home Church, Feb. 26, 1983.

that provided legitimacy for the group. From his letters, it appears that Geraty saw Home Church as an extension of PMC, with the Home Church pastor working under the direction of Chester Damron. As long as Geraty was closely involved with Home Church, PMC and the University were reluctant to interfere. Some thought that PMC simply did not notice what was happening. But PMC, historically sensitive to "off-shoot" services, was, in fact, quite aware of developments.<sup>1</sup>

It was not long before official contact was made between the two groups.

Early in June 1977, at the suggestion of Thomas Blincoe, Dean of the Seminary, Bill Poole, Thomas Geraty, and I [John McLarty] met with Joseph Smoot [President of the University] and John Kroncke [Pastor of PMC] to discuss what we were doing at Home Church. President Smoot did not see much value in what we were doing, but Pastor Kroncke thought it might perform a valuable mission in reaching young people who had become disgruntled with the regular church. At the end of the meeting, President Smoot directed us to request permission from Pastor Kroncke and the PMC Board to continue. We did not feel free to do this, so we asked to affiliate with Pioneer in order to benefit from their wisdom and position. They declined any official affiliation but did accept unofficially.<sup>2</sup>

The following is the document that was subsequently drawn up to spell out the guidelines for the relationship.

1. A member of the Home Church staff be invited to staff meetings at PMC and/or one of the elders at Home Church be included on the PMC Board of Elders.
2. One of the Pioneer's senior elders visit us often to counsel us on our mission and worship.
3. The Home Church treasurer be appraised of the offering schedule and be furnished a bank bag for delivering the offerings to PMC.
4. Someone at Home Church be given names of persons that PMC staff members think might respond to a particular ministry.
5. Home Church be kept informed of PMC's outreach programs so that our members may participate.
6. John Kroncke be given a brief quarterly report on what is happening at Home Church.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bruington and Crosby, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.



John Kroncke and the PMC staff regarded the Home Church as a "halfway house" whose mission was to get people back to the main church. Home Church, on the other hand, wanted to create other house groups, but this idea brought strong disapproval from the PMC pastoral staff and church board, who feared that matters would "get out of hand" and develop into an "off-shoot" movement.

According to the Chester Damron, one of the side benefits of Home Church to PMC was that during this time many small groups such as "Divorce Recovery" began to meet on a regular basis. Also, PMC reorganized its members into small parishes to be cared for by an elder--again the small group idea. The quality of pastoral care changed to meet the pressure that was exerted by the mere fact that Home Church existed.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Typical Worship Service at Home Church**

These observations were made by a first time visitor to the group:

At about 10:50 A.M. several cars began to arrive at the Home Church. There didn't seem to be anyone designated as leader, but each one knew what he was to do at the appropriate time and rose to the occasion and did as was expected of him. One person had song service, another led out in welcoming the visitors by having all the members stand, and then they introduced the visitors. There were about 20, or one-third of the group, who were visiting.

The opening song was "What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine." This was followed by what they called "Caring and Sharing." It was easy to see how support was developed for each other in this technique. Several opened their hearts and told exactly the way they felt about things. One young person, who obviously was not concerned with the risk of disclosure, opened his heart by telling very intimate details about the "night of conception." He rejoiced publicly that it was on that occasion that he had made a full recommitment to God. He later told everyone that was why his wife was absent from church that day; she was home sick. Another person spoke of the joy of being re-employed, while another was out of work. Three people were asked to pray for an assigned list of people and needs. It was a long list. Several had to take notes so as to not forget the prayer topics.

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<sup>1</sup>Chester Damron, former associate pastor of PMC, interviewed by phone, March 1985.

Two black girls, non-church members, were visiting and sang, "We've Got to Get It All Together" and a seminarian, Rod Harrison, spoke on "Where Is God?" His sermon was not preaching in the normal mode but rather another self-disclosure of how he had shielded himself from people all his life and had become self-reliant, and not dependent on people. Only that week at Kettering Hospital in Ohio, while finishing a course in chaplaincy had he discovered that other people really cared for him. This was shown by a farewell embrace and love from his support group, he confessed.

Church was over at 12:20 p.m., not before there was an interchange of reactions, comment, or feedback on the sermon of the day. A fellowship meal followed with about half of the group remaining to enjoy the fellowship.<sup>1</sup>

### Theology Affects Structure

The structure of Home Church was based on *koinonia* rather than on the conventional view of the church. It regarded God as, "God with us" (Matt 1:23), a very personal Being who has inhabited humanity visibly in Jesus Christ and is always with us collectively and individually through the Holy Spirit. This theology led to an informal liturgy that allowed a great deal of freedom of expression. Participation was not limited to the professional ministry, or even a select group of offices of the church, it was shared by the entire group without restriction as to age, race, sex, or education.

The church as the "body of Christ" was a very strong reality for Home Church. The group did not see church as "organization" or "building." Neither did they dominate their philosophy of church with such statements as "I am the church" or "I and my friends are the church," but rather, "we are the body of Christ," meaning that any who chose to fellowship with the group was a part of the body. Members and leaders felt that this idea of openness drew people rather than repelled

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<sup>1</sup>Charles J. Griffin, Observations made at Berrien Springs, Mich. SDA Home Church on Sabbath Feb. 26, 1984.

them.<sup>1</sup> By taking the model of the incarnation, the church hoped to identify the divine being of Jesus, reveal Him to the world, and seek to understand the needs of man. The Home Church's charter included a chart depicting the theological structure (fig. 2).

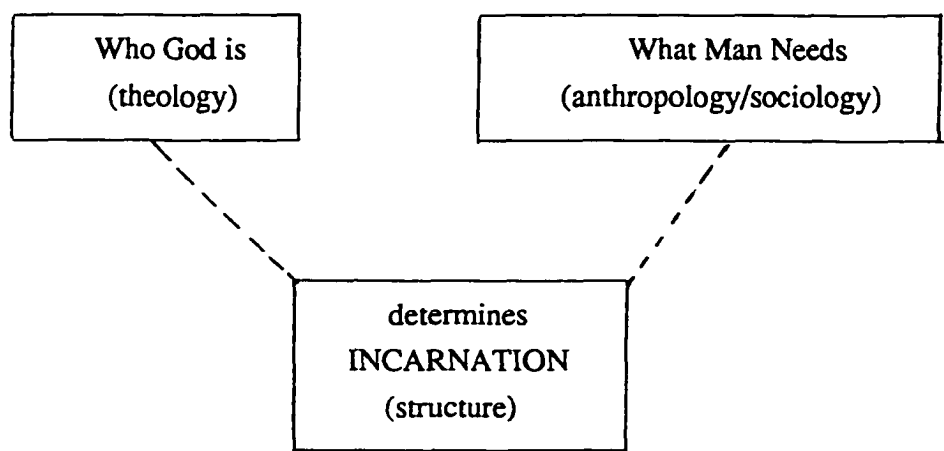


Fig. 2 Berrien Springs, Mich. SDA Home Church Theological Structure of Home Church.

SOURCE: Dean Bruington and Tim Crosby, eds. *Home Is Where the Heart Is* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Duplicating and Printing, 1978), p. 27.

The Home Church had two functions: (1) To provide a biblical framework for the church and (2) to facilitate ministry to the needs of the people it served. "While Home Church structures are molded by its mission, its mission is in turn molded by its structures. Hence, what the church does grows out of what it perceives itself to be."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Bruington and Crosby, pp. 29-30.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 27.

The Home Church was strongly committed to the priesthood of all believers. The responsibility of reaching the world rested on all members, not just the clergy.<sup>1</sup>

### A Critique of Home Church

It appears that the original goal of reaching the "unchurched" at Andrews University may have been met for a time, but by 1983 Home Church had a different goal. As is the case with many house-church movements, Home Church tended to attract those who are hurting and those who do not find fulfillment in traditional structure and liturgy.

On the negative side, it appears that Home Church was turned too much inward. It had little or no outreach ministry. It rightly helped people who were hurting and attempted to stabilize them in the church, but nothing seemed to follow. The goal to reveal incarnational ministry was excellent, but apparently it was not seem to be realized.

A further potential danger lurked in the familiarity between spouses. To share the "peace" (meaning to embrace someone) and to touch people may be a need in churches today, but great precaution must be taken between the sexes. When, if ever, and how often should such expressions take place? Sanctified judgment would really be in order here.

The worship services of the Home Church were beautiful and simple--these were probably its greatest asset. Everyone was a part of the event. The greatest contribution that this group made to the community was, possibly, the provision of an alternative worship style that permitted a total incorporation of the individual into the service with the freedom to do what he believed was proper. Whoever

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

wanted to sing a song or make a statement could do so. Structure was fluid enough to allow each individual to do "his thing" without feeling threatened.

Thus the Home Church captured a group of disillusioned people--at least some who at the beginning of the organization were tired of "structure"--and they found meaningful experiences in "structured informality." Home Church was born at a time when many students were going out the back door of the church. This simple approach reversed that trend and brought a new spiritual experience into the lives of many young people.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE GENTRY SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST HOME CHURCH IN ARKANSAS

#### Background to Gentry Church

Seventh-day Adventists began work in northwest Arkansas in the 1880s. The first baptism at Gentry occurred in 1887 at Flint Creek.<sup>1</sup> By the 1905-06 school term, a church school was in the town and Josephine Wilson (later Tucker) was the teacher.<sup>2</sup> In 1938, that church school, became Ozark Academy.

During the war years, the school faced severe financial hardships, but refurbishing of the old buildings and exercising plenty of spirit the school kept alive in the 1940s, '50s, and the early '60s. The decade of the '70s was one of prosperity and growth for the school. Enrollment increased to its all-time high of 250. A new administration and classroom complex was built for one and a half million dollars, and a modern, hexagonal church to accommodate the 500 plus membership was added.

#### Need for a Different Approach to Gentry

Unexpectedly, the new church building created an invisible barrier against the community. The local people came to believe that Adventists were exclusive

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<sup>1</sup>V. B. Watts, "Arkansas," *RH*, May 26, 1904, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup>"Ozark Academy," *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1966 ed.), p. 943.

and very wealthy. Because of this the town people refused to attend the Academy church. This was indeed a strange phenomenon for only a decade earlier the town people had regarded Adventists as those "poor people out by the creek" who operated a run-down school.

When in October 1980 I arrived in Gentry as the new pastor, I concluded that before the little town of Gentry could be reached with the three angels' messages, it would be necessary to remove some of the feelings and barriers that existed. One objective set by the church officers at the year-end officers' planning session was to open a small church in the town. Since I had my own strong convictions concerning house churches derived from South America and a mandate from Andrews University to complete my D. Min. project, the Gentry Church and I set out to open new work in the town. The church membership, at the time, was 650, with an additional 225 academy students.

Several attempts were made to enlist members from the large congregation in the new church project, but to no avail. Many offered suggestions and words of encouragement, but absolutely no one was willing to swarm and form a new church. Large churches provide such a cozy place to hide.

### **Disappointed Group Enlisted**

In mid-1982, a group of twelve people began meeting in the home of a member from a neighboring church. This group, not members of the Gentry Church, felt the need for deeper Bible study and an informal worship format. They had a strong missionary spirit and wanted to open new work in a town north of Gentry.

This group had already experienced some friction between themselves and their church Pastor. He was busy leading out in a building program, and most of his time and interests were consumed by that. Since he apparently had no other agenda at the time, some people grew weary and wanted to be involved in spiritual-

growth activities. Tensions increased and hard feelings developed. The pastor was upset because these twelve members did not support the building program; and the people were upset because the pastor failed to recognize their spiritual needs. Sensing the explosive nature of the situation the conference president asked me to intervene and try to work out a reconciliation with the people.

One of the local elders and I visited the disaffected families and worked out a reconciliation. Subsequently, the people began to attend the large church in Gentry. In February 1983 a new fellowship Bible class was formed for these people and a few others who desired to join.

The format for the class was simple and informal, but it had a strong emphasis on Bible study and Bible marking. Ample time was allowed for discussion and inter-personal relationships. Unfortunately, one church member believed, the class departed from the "Adventist norm" because they did not use the *Sabbath School Quarterly*. Considerable agitation arose, but the elders and the church board supported the new class. Soon twenty-five to thirty persons were attending every week.

In late March 1983 two people were baptized as a result of the work of this group. On that Sabbath, the entire group met at my home for their first fellowship meal. The day before, I had searched the little town of Gentry for a "house" for the new church that was forming. A former president of the Gentry Chamber of Commerce offered a house rent-free beginning May 10. This house was strategically located in the center of town, one block from the post office.

Between March and May, I preached several sermons to the large congregation on the meaning of "church." Two of the sermons on the "Body of Christ" explained that even though Christ is in heaven, He is the head of the church and His people must represent Him on the earth. The small group, while they met



separately for their Sabbath School time, joined the main body for the worship service.

On April 23, 1983, the little church met for the first time on its own at the pastor's home. About forty-five people attended, and there was an air of excitement. The group spent the afternoon discussing "house church" concepts, including a study of the NT evidence for house churches. They found the book of Acts particularly challenging. Some were surprised to learn that "church" meant more than merely a building.

By this time, most of the people in the group understood that the house-church idea was not just a passing fancy; it could be real! They understood that there could be a church with a simple organization, that encouraged informal worship, and that that format was acceptable to the larger church. The Gentry church took formal action to support the house church. The elders and the board members expressed themselves in total support with the new approach. The conference president and the Arkansas-Louisiana Conference Executive Committee also took an action registering its approval of the house church.

### **Home Church Organized**

The "Gentry Seventh-day Adventist Home Church" (the name chosen by the group) met and organized in their facility on May 15, 1983. Forty-seven people were present to help in the selection of the name and to choose officers of the new church. On the second Sabbath, sixty people attended. Very quickly, the new place of worship began to provide a "neutral zone" for the people of Gentry. The artificial barriers came down in a hurry, and by the third Sabbath, the house was full.

Late in 1983 a rift developed in the new little house church. Fortunately, however, the two instigators with negative, critical attitudes moved away and the

church was spared further divisions. House churches, because of their openness and informality, are very vulnerable to negative or critical people.

### **Permanent Location for House Church**

The sale of the rental property where the church was meeting forced the house church to look for a new meeting place. A home being sold by an Adventist family was purchased. The City of Gentry required that a variance be issued in order to use a dwelling house for a church. The following notice had to appear in the local paper.

Monday, November 28, 1983, at 7:00 p.m. at Gentry City Hall, the Planning Commission will hold a special meeting regarding a variance to hold a Seventh-day Adventist Home Church located at 201 N. Collins, Gentry, Arkansas. All interested persons are urged to attend, and voice their opinions.

Theresa H. Oliver, Clerk  
Published in *Journal Advance*  
Once on Nov. 16, 1983<sup>1</sup>

Not a single person from the community came to register a dissenting vote. Several Seventh-day Adventists were present to speak in favor of the project, but no speeches were necessary. The City Council voted unanimously in favor of the variance. This opened the way for the congregation to purchase the house. On Sabbath, December 17, 1983, the congregation took possession of its new home.

### **Home Church Arrangements**

The living room, dining room, and kitchen of the new home were connected in a way that provided enough space for fifty people to sit in a circular, face-to-face fashion. The former owners had left most of their furniture, including an

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<sup>1</sup>"Notice of Public Hearing," *Journal Advance*, Gentry, Ark., Nov. 16, 1983.

organ. Since the building had formerly been a family residence, it provided a very homey atmosphere and was conducive to a participatory style of worship.

Due to the shape of the buildings and arrangement of chairs, many buildings where worship is conducted remind one more of a passenger train than a place for fellowship. In most structured worship places, long rows of pews or seats force the people into a pattern of looking at the back of the person in front of them. Neither eye contact nor interaction is possible in this arrangement. The circular format fosters warm fellowship. Much can be learned by looking into another person's eyes. Through the simple circular arrangement of chairs, much more openness, mutual support, and affirmation is fostered.

It must be noted, however, that informality and openness in worship is not without its problems. Informal liturgy makes some feel that "anything goes." Some begin to think that all order and organization should be banned and that not even a church bulletin should be used. Lack of reverence may also become a problem.

One early decision made by the members of the house church was that no formal offerings should be taken on Sabbath morning. This was done to avoid offending visitors. A simple stand at the door of the house was provided for members to drop their offerings into a basket as they entered for worship each week. Some "traditionalists" feared that the income would drop because of this, but there never was any shortage of funds for the church. (See table 2.)

One major concern in house churches is what to do with children. Some organizations absorb the children into the adult program. This did not happen in the Gentry Home Church. All Sabbath School divisions functioned. Four leaders were assigned to the separate age levels. A Vacation Bible School was conducted for the community each year. Church school was no problem for the house church, for the mother church had a very strong educational program in the area. Gentry

TABLE 2

**GENTRY SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST HOME CHURCH  
TITHES AND OFFERINGS**

Date	Tithe	Sab. School	Com. Budget
May 83	1,455.01	515.29	356.37
June	1,984.80	131.16	491.54*
July	2,000.96	739.12	678.37*
Aug	2,285.25	226.47	424.62*
Sept	1,483.92	170.40	537.77*
Oct	2,596.13	529.26	933.86*
Nov	1,576.00	83.85	441.23*
Dec	2,157.56	194.73	3,515.90*
Jan 84	1,732.85	517.94	728.85*
Feb	3,358.16	154.50	582.18*
Mar	1,756.89	150.06	763.22
Apr	1,813.22	94.54	384.10
May	1,835.43	268.64	625.71
June	1,709.52	83.16	973.48
July	1,717.92	197.51	790.96
Aug	1,588.64	115.09	688.08
Sept	2,206.47	201.36	587.13
Oct	1,923.14	153.83	563.92
Nov	1,878.77	115.20	504.46
Dec	<u>1,698.33</u>	<u>408.43</u>	<u>736.69</u>
Totals	38,767.95	5,050.54	15,308.44

Source: Rupert Gay, Treasurer of Gentry SDA Home Church \* Indicates a combined offering of building and combined budget.

Home Church affiliated with the church school, and because of the constituency arrangement, one of the members of the small church became the secretary of the school board.

By October 1984 church attendance had grown from fifty to sixty each week (see table 3) . Some members even had to return to the main church because of lack of space. It was at this time that the house church decided to swarm and

TABLE 3

**GENTRY SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST HOME CHURCH  
CLERK'S REPORT FOR 1984**

Date	Membership	Additions	Deletions	End
Mar. 22	39			
Apr. 12	39	5		44
Aug. 15	44	1		45
Sept. 1	45		4	41
Nov. 17	41	1		42
Nov. 24	42	2		44
Dec. 22	44	5		49

Source: Dolores Adams, Clerk of Gentry Seventh-day Adventist Home Church.

create a similar church in the city of Gravette, twelve miles to the north. One of the elders, Diana Hartfield, led out in this venture. A Revelation Seminar had been conducted in Gravette the previous summer by the youth of the church.

### **Conflicts and Tensions**

A conflict developed in the Gentry Home Church over the question of ordaining a woman elder. The procedure took place according to the *Church Manual* and the guidelines of the Southwestern Union for appointing women elders. However, several months after the election, a serious split arose. Three women questioned the proceedings, claiming that the Lord was telling them that a mistake had been made in the selection of the woman elder. Pressure became so intense that the woman elder resigned. She was, however, assigned as the one in charge of the new house church in Gravette.

During its third year of operation, serious tensions developed among several of the Gentry Home Church members. The dissension could be traced back to the time of organization. Part of the original group had been disloyal to the denominational leadership and were highly critical of church organization. In addition, deep-seated jealousies existed. From time to time, Satanic forces seemed apparent even in the Sabbath worship services. The open format permitted these negative feelings to grow. In early 1985, attendance began to dwindle and offerings diminished--almost to the point of forcing the little church to close its doors. Something had to be done to save the rest of the body. It was deemed necessary to disfellowship the leader of the negative movement. This very painful process really polarized the group and attendance dropped even further. This experience provided a painful lesson for the house church; i.e., while it is important to maintain patience and respect for others, it is imperative to maintain unity and discipline. The time does come when those who continue to criticize the church and its leadership have to be dealt with in order to spare the rest of the body.

### **Strengths of the Gentry Home Church**

#### **Simple Worship Style**

The Gentry Home Church provided a style of worship that, prior to its existence, was not available to the community. The format was simple and spontaneous and provided extra time for study and fellowship. The home setting encouraged informality. There was time for sharing and caring; those who were hurting could share their hurts and receive help.

One of the outstanding qualities of the house church was its simplicity. The "rich man" syndrome of Gentry was overcome. Local people did not have to attend the "cathedral" at the Academy; they felt at ease in a wood-framed house,

very similar to the houses in which they lived. Occasionally people walked in from the street to attend worship. They came as they were in their shirt sleeves.

### **Comfortable Atmosphere for Non-members**

The house church is an excellent place to establish new converts in the church. When people leave their former life to become Seventh-day Adventists, traumatic things happen to their life-style. Food, recreation, and dress become drastically different. Men can no longer go to the corner to "drink beer with the boys," enjoy a "Sunday pork roast," or attend the "rockfest." Their friends are no longer with them; and they feel rejected, isolated, alone. It is easier for such people to turn to the house-church environment where they can find warm, supportive friendship that helps them make the transition smoothly.

Small groups provide more opportunity for people to learn how to cook healthfully; to develop new friends; to discover how to use their time wisely; and begin to utilize their talents in new adventures for God. In house churches, new converts find people who really will "listen" and become genuinely interested in them, people who will give a helping hand. In a short time, they can be "fused" into the body.

Simplicity shows up in the financial matters of the church as well. There is little pressure for offerings since the building is quite economical to operate. No offering appeals need be made. An offering basket at the door indirectly indicates the need.

Since large sums are not drained off to keep the system going, more money is available for ministry. The Gentry Home Church developed quickly into an aggressive missionary-minded group. One of their first projects was a ministry to the University of Arkansas campus twenty-five miles away in Fayetteville. On June 10, 1983, they opened a "Fellowship Center," one block from the campus.

This venture cost them over \$10,000 annually. Such a program would have been impossible in a regular church structure because those monies would have been absorbed into the operating costs of the church. Since house churches do not have a high cost of operation, certain economies can be ascertained and money may be directed into outreach functions. Many congregations have such heavy operating costs that there are no funds left for evangelism and outreach.

From the beginning, the Gentry Home Church maintained an on-going outreach to the community, including the "Five Day Plan to Stop Smoking," "Grief Recovery Seminars," "Cooking Schools," and "Revelation Seminars." Several study and prayer groups met in members' homes each week. It was common for more non-church members to be in attendance on Sabbath morning at the house church than there were at the large academy church.

### **More Lay Opportunities**

The house church was almost totally a lay movement. As pastor, I spoke only once a month. Everything else was done by the members. They had the opportunity to carry the full responsibility of the church, including the church board meetings, sermons, visitation, and administration. Later, a lay pastor was appointed to oversee the congregation. This further relieved the pastor for evangelism, training, and other pastoral duties.

One of the most positive benefits that came from the Gentry Home church was the opportunity for service that was given to a group of people who, prior to this, were deeply frustrated with their church because of the lack of involvement. Church became meaningful to them.



### **Positive Influence on Mother Church**

As pastor of both churches, it appeared to me that the Home Church had an indirect influence on the larger church. The observation is entirely subjective, I recognize, but shortly after the inception of the home church, the Gentry Church changed its ineffective prayer meetings (only 12-15 attended each week out of a membership of 747) to "Home Bible Fellowships" which had a total attendance of over 200 in twelve different homes. The house church also influenced the level of warmth and fellowship at the large church. The Sabbath morning greeters sensed their need of becoming more friendly in welcoming visitors to the church.

### **Weaknesses of the Gentry Home Church**

Strengths not carefully monitored may reveal weaknesses. Informal structure may end in chaos if the wrong person manipulates the open forum. "Off-shoot" movements or emotionally disturbed people can easily capture the moment and totally destroy worship. Leadership must be prepared for this.

Not all members who make up the group have these problems, but every community has its share of "crackpots," those who delight in creating disturbances, and some of these seem to be especially attracted to the small, informal groups. Such people have deep spiritual needs and must be helped, but sometimes they try the patience of the saints.

Another weakness of the house church is the *stigma* that is often attached to it by the rest of the Adventist family. Because of its uniqueness, some considered the Gentry Home Church to be outside mainstream Adventism and said, "They don't worship like we do!" or "They seem to be fanatical." Still others were so accustomed to doing things the old way that they constantly tried to lead the little church back to the old way. Consequently, time had to be expended to explain

explain once again the biblical nature of the church and the totally biblical and acceptable status of house churches.

Occasionally, the question would be raised about putting up a building, as though a building would offer security and stability. People who raised this issue had to be shown that "church" had to do with the people of God, the body of Christ, rather than bricks and mortar on the corner of Main Street and First.

CHAPTER X

**OBSERVATIONS ABOUT  
HOUSE CHURCHES**

For those who wish to experiment with house churches, perhaps a few words of advice and precaution are in order. House churches can be exciting and rewarding but, if misused, can be volatile and divisive.

**Potential Hazards**

1. *Elitism.* Some members of house churches develop a sense of elitism, a feeling of superiority to the parent organization, a sense of aloofness, that they belong to the "in" group, that they are on the cutting edge of new things in the church, and the others left behind are not as good as they.<sup>1</sup>

2. *Faddism.* In small groups, someone usually shows up with some strange theological trivia or with weird ideas of doctrinal truth. These kinds of people find the small group the perfect arena to disseminate their "new light" and ride their "hobby horse."

3. *Individualism.* The house church is not everyone's "dish." There are probably many "salty" Christians who would never feel at home or feel comfortable with the intimate sharing and sometimes intense emotional climate of a house church.

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<sup>1</sup>Oliver Powell, "The House Church and the Church System," *Chicago Theological Seminary Register* 64 (1973):27-28. (Several ideas from Powell have been used in this section.)

4. *Separatism*. Almost inevitably, a "turned-on" minority arouses fear and hostility among the majority.

5. *Extremism*. There is the danger of getting beyond one's depth, of moving into areas of experience where there are serious personality dislocations without the presence of skilled, experienced people on hand to guide the situation.

6. *Emotionalism*. Less worrisome, but nonetheless frustrating, is the possibility of a group becoming bogged down in a morass of emotional responses to each other that result in interpersonal clashes which no one at hand has the insight or the ability to clarify and solve. "Charismatics" may wish to capture the group speaking in tongues, etc.

7. *Indistinctiveness*. There is the possibility of a house church lacking any distinctive quality. It may simply become one more congenial experience in group life, zeroing in on purely personal concerns with little or no reference to the power-releasing potential of the Gospel.

8. *Self-centeredness*. The house church can become a smug, self-centered retreat from reality, a means through which the group does not have to face up to ugly realities and difficult, controversial issues.

9. *Denominationalism*. The house church can be "used" by the church system as a means, a tool, a device, a strategy to build up institutional strength and prosperity. The temptation is subtle and may be present more often than one expects. There is a dread and not an altogether implausible possibility that hard-pressed for ideas, leaders will seize upon the house church concept, shape it into a "program," write pamphlets about it, "sell" it to the churches, and with all the slick know-how of denominational promotion at its worst, undermine all the rich promise that house churches offer for genuine spiritual growth.

### **Benefits of House Churches**

There are on the other hand reasons why house churches can succeed and make excellent contributions. A few reasons why they should be considered are the following:

1. *Spiritual growth and development.* In the small group, the study of the Bible can be very meaningful. Traditional constraints do not have to be followed and, consequently, more time can be released for in-depth Bible study and prayer. Uncomplicated orders of service can facilitate getting down to serious spiritual matters.

2. *Fellowship and support.* The circular, informal arrangement encourages interpersonal relationships. There is an eye-to-eye "usness" about house churches that is warm and personal. Personal crises can be met with friends who gather around to pray the person through.

3. *Economics.* It does not cost as much to operate a house church as it does a conventional church. Therefore, it is possible to have funds for evangelism. Because of its simple nature this kind of church can be planted anywhere, in the highrise apartment or in a pole house in a jungle.

4. *Cultural sensitivity.* House churches meet people where they are in their culture. They serve as a "neutral zone," an excellent place in which the transition into the "body" can take place. It is more acceptable for a person to walk into a house on the street than to go to a place that is known and identifiable to everyone as the "church."

5. *Means to establish new converts.* The radical life-style modifications that occur with a person that modifies his life from the world to Christianity is a traumatic experience. The structure of the house church offers an atmosphere for the person to be "fused" into the "body."

6. *Reaching the secular mind.* Secular man has to live in a world of extreme pressure, competition, and, at times, a life of make-believe. When the weekend comes, he is ready to "let it all come out" and be his "real self." He does not want to go to a place where the regular rat race continues. The informal worship format of house churches has the potential for answering the needs of this person. In the context of house churches, this kind of person finds candid spirituality and genuine experiences of real religion.

7. *Salvaging the disillusioned and dissidents.* Many times those who are discouraged or even critical of the church have come to this condition because they have lost the meaning of church. They want to be involved, but the denomination does not seem to have a place for them. When their energies can be harnessed in a small group, a place where everyone has to do something for survival, many times their self-esteem is restored, and they are inspired to use their energies for positive endeavors.

8. *Lay movement.* In house churches, the members "own" the church. There is ample room for developing leadership and having full authority for running the church. Cho has demonstrated that women make excellent spiritual guides in house churches. The minister steps back and relates to the church as facilitator, trainer, and coordinator.

9. *Ministry is free to do evangelism.* One of the nice things that happens in house churches is that the minister does not have to involve himself in the mundane "nuts and bolts" of church operation. More of his time can be spent in study, prayer, visitation, training, and soulwinning. The members of the small church normally delight to take charge and feel deep satisfaction with the trust and added responsibility.

### **Other Suggestions**

One question is justifiably asked at this point. Where do house churches go after functioning for several years in their alternate structure? Should they remain as house churches, or should they become regular structured churches and dedicated buildings?

Some house churches should develop into conventional churches, with buildings and the regular accouterments of church. Others, however, will and should remain house churches. All depends on the environment and the particular needs of the congregation. Some may wish to regard house churches as a useful provision of a transitional period for taking people out of the world, as an incubation room for the new born. If this is valid, there will always be people being born who will need such a cozy place for that development. It seems only logical that house churches, if they are serving a purpose, need to continue in some form to fulfill this need. Each circumstance would have to be reviewed on its own merits to determine whether it is wise to proceed with regular church development or the continuation of the house church.

## CHAPTER XI

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

#### Summary

When Jesus formed his church, he meant it to be a means through which grace and the gospel could flow out to the world. NT writers frequently refer to the organization as the "body of Christ." This mystical union with Jesus incorporates concepts of a living organism and the understanding that Christ is the head of the church. Hence, it is reasonable to believe that from time to time, the "body" would reproduce itself; it would find ways of coping with foreign elements and develop new ways of continuing to survive.

Christianity was outlawed by Rome for the first several centuries of its existence; consequently, believers who wanted to worship continued to identify with Judaism, a *religio licita*. However, the enormous growth spurt of Christianity and the fervor of its adherents soon excited the hatred of the Jews. Christians, excommunicated from Jewish religious centers, were forced to establish their own centers of worship. The natural place for early Christians to meet was in their own homes. City dwellers about the Mediterranean had no difficulty in adapting to this concept because the home was already used in many cultures as the expected place for learning and religious experiences. Thus the family unit and the house church became the backbone for early church worship.

Archaeological discoveries of the third century confirm that "house church" continued to be used as an integral part of the Christian church for more than



two and half centuries. When the political climate shifted, elaborate buildings were erected under the name of Christianity, revealing probably more of the pride of the emperor and his victories than genuine Christian growth. Two things strongly influenced the religious leaders of the third century and beyond to elaborate the simple structure of the church--the development of the hierarchy and the rapid increase of doctrinal heresies within the church. It was felt that buildings of marble and granite would safeguard the church.

John Wesley, inspired by the Pietist movement and the *collegia pietatis*, rekindled the flame for small group organizations in early Methodism. Through his societies and class meetings, people who had been strict Anglicans found revival in the church--primarily through informal, small-group meetings. Although Wesley's small groups were not exactly house churches, they definitely were an inspiration to Protestants who followed Wesley, especially those who were developing the small-group concept.

Early Seventh-day Adventists, used house churches extensively. Most Adventist pioneers had left prominent Protestant churches in search of biblical truth. Few of them had an abundance of wealth, so, of necessity, they met in humble meeting places such as the parlors, or large kitchens, of private homes. Worship services consisted of reading Scripture and the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, prayer, and a "social meeting." Generally, leadership was in the hands of lay persons for there were very few ministers.

In recent times, several organizations have attempted to experiment with the house church as an alternate church structure. The Chicago Seminary in the 1970s introduced house churches, seeking an answer to certain sociological needs. The major thrust was for a more humanistic, psychological approach to church, but the experiment was short-lived. Ecumenikos, a house church in Kansas City,

Missouri, was another ecumenical attempt to merge five churches. It dwindled into merely a social gospel kind of organization with community-oriented programs primarily aimed at secular and mundane pursuits.

One of the exciting chapters in church history of this decade has been the rediscovery of the church in China. The World Council of Churches has reported forty-two grassroots Christian communities in China (1980) and over 400 households of faith. When the Communists took over that nation, churches fell under the control of the government, and during the "Cultural Revolution" the church was crushed. Structure as it had been known died only to be reborn in the form of house churches as groups started meeting in homes of the people. What for three decades was believed to have been a total loss of organized religion in China may have become one of the greatest blessings in current church history. In a time of crisis the house church provided a means of survival.

The two Adventist house church experiments--in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and Gentry, Arkansas--surfaced near church institutions. The experiment in Michigan was an attempt to re-integrate disenchanted students into the religious life of the campus; the one in Arkansas used disenchanted members to establish a new church. Both experiments began in a flurry of excitement with quite clear statements of purpose. Both churches continue to function to this day, not, however, without enormous problems and a departure from their original goals.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, in this study a house church is defined as a small group of people who have for various reasons chosen to conduct their religious activities in the homes of members or in other informal places. House churches are formed because people believe that they best reflect the models of worship depicted in the NT; they provide a place for warm, open, fellowship; they serve well as support

groups; they answer a specific need in emergency situations; and they provide a means for planting the gospel in certain cultural, political, and economic situations.

The term "house church" indicates two things: (1) "House" means the level of intimacy, informality, and openness of one's own home, (2) "church" connotes its mission and relationship to the historical "body of Christ." Used biblically, house church means a congregation of believers that meet in some one's home. Today, house church may be broadened to mean a concept of worship that occurs in places other than traditional church buildings.

This project identified three categories of small group meetings. (1) There are those basic congregations, like those found in the NT times, that are free standing, independent churches that meet in people's homes or in similar, humble circumstances. These are completely organized and retain membership in the church. They conduct the celebrations of the church such as baptism, communion, etc. This is the only group that really qualify as a church. (2) Some groups may be attached to a large mother church but feel the need of freedom and openness. These not finding this environment in the larger church, choose to meet, at least part of the time, in small-group settings. (They fulfill their needs for intensified fellowship and worship in the context of the fellowship group, sometimes referred to as a house church, but do not measure up to the biblical model.) (3) Others groups never sever ties with the mother church and function more as "cells." These could be considered as satellites since they support the main body and have regular meetings with it. The small group is looked upon as the place where *koinonia* takes place and spiritual growth occurs. The membership of these members resides in the mother church and celebration occurs within the main body each week. Here again, in our limited definition, this group is not a legitimate house church but an extension of the main congregation.

This study has indicated that house churches may be used effectively in a transitional period but work best for only for short-term or temporary situations. Furthermore, when possible, regular church life and church buildings should be planned for in the long-range plan. Those who use house churches need to understand the complications and the dangers that are inherent and take necessary precautions to avoid the pitfalls.

House churches should be considered by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in its total global strategy. Notwithstanding the presence of some negative factors, house churches may be very helpful in planting new churches in areas where cultural or economic barriers exist. In some instances, house churches may endure for a short period: in others, they may provide the only way for the church to survive.

House churches can meet a specific need in the Adventist church today. When a congregation is apathetic or where certain groups of people have become disenchanted with church structure, a house church can serve as a temporary bridge to re-invigorate that group. Also, when large churches need an approach to strengthen *koinonia* and provide a small-group dimension to the church, house-church activity can offer openness, informality, and affirmation. Additionally, large empty churches may benefit from the "satellite" dimension of house churches.

Will house churches continue in the future? Yes, they will! The church that meets in people's homes has endured for almost two thousand years. It possesses charm and a rich heritage. The concept has been demonstrated to be scripturally sound and historically confirmed. The "body of Christ" as a living organism will continue to reproduce itself in all parts of the earth. At times it may disappear outwardly or even be forced underground, and during such times its survival will be based entirely on the basis of the "domus ecclesiae."

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