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How Should the Adventist Denomination Deal with the House Church Trend?

Millions of Americans have abandoned the conventional structure of religion—the congregation or parish and denomination—for small, informal groups that meet for prayer, Bible study, and fellowship in homes or other temporary locations. A similar pattern is underway in Europe, and there is evidence that it is beginning in urban areas in Latin America and Africa. In fact, it has been a primary form of Christian faith in China, India, and the Middle East for some time and this includes Adventist missions.

Survey research suggests that one in five American adults attends a house church at least once a month. “An increasing number of Americans are moving from First Baptist on Main Street to living-room congregations,” said an American Baptist Press news release published July 5, 2006 (ABPNEWS 2006).

National surveys conducted in 2006 in the U.S. by the Barna Group with a random sample of 2,008 interviews (with a margin of sampling error plus or minus two percentage points at the 95% confidence level) found that more than 20 million adults attended services in house churches each week and as many as 43 million attended once a month (Barna Group 2006).

In these surveys, a house church was described as “a group of believers that meets regularly in a home or place other than a church building. These groups are not part of a typical church; they meet independently, are self-governed and consider themselves to be a complete church on their own” (Barna Group 2006).

The survey found that 93% have spoken prayer during their meetings, 90% read from the Bible, 89% spend time serving people outside of their group, 87% devote time to sharing personal needs or experiences, 85%

spend time eating and talking before or after the meeting, 76% have a formal teaching time, 70% incorporate music or singing, 52% take an offering from participants that is given to organized ministries and 51% share communion (Barna Group 2007).

Ed Stetzer from Lifeway Research found a similar response. When asking if a group of 20 people or less praying and studying the Bible was a respondent's primary form of spiritual gathering, he reports that "26.3% of the 3,600 Americans who were asked that question indicated that they did so as their primary form of spiritual or religious gathering." Stetzer cross-tabulated those respondents who indicated that they also attended a larger church gathering regularly and concluded that somewhere between 1.4% and 6% of the American population is part of a house church of some kind. That is somewhere between 4,300,000 and 18,420,000 American adults (Stetzer 2009).

This trend in North America and Europe is driven largely by new generations who do not see why it is important for local groups of believers to spend so much time and resources on owning and maintaining property, hiring employees, and the organizational activities related to these non-spiritual functions. Even if the bulk of these operations are shifted to denominational units, they still require support from volunteer local groups. New generations today would rather keep things simple so that their spiritual fellowship centers entirely on the core elements; prayer, Bible study, friendship, and occasional projects that demonstrate Christ's compassion and grace. They are uncomfortable with the conventional form of religion, not its spiritual content.

The Seventh-day Adventist denomination cannot escape this reality. It is in many ways parallel to the emphasis on lay witnessing and ministry that has long been emphasized by the denomination, and it has specific similarities in many stories from denominational history. In fact, one of the most important strategic questions for the denomination at this point in history is, can this development in contemporary culture provide an opportunity to reach new generations and large numbers of people who are not responding to established methods? Is this trend really an opportunity opened for Christ's mission by the Holy Spirit?

From the perspective of denominational leaders who have given their lives to the mission and corporate health of the Seventh-day Adventist Church this trend creates certain problems. Do these problems make it impossible to respond to this strategic opportunity? Are the risks involved prohibitive?

1. *The problem of liability:* If a small group of people meet in a home on Sabbaths and engages in prayer, fellowship, and Bible study does that make the denomination liable for any eventuality that might result in the group?

Of course not. Groups of people gather on Sabbath for spiritual activities all the time. This has always been true. There is no legal precedent for one of these informal groups to be assigned to the liability of the denomination even if Seventh-day Adventist church members are involved in the group. The denomination does not and cannot control all the informal personal activities of church members. It cannot be held liable for these informal, personal activities because such control is an impossibility and very probably illegal in a free country like the United States.

The issue is really about control, and it is precisely the urge for control that is being rejected by new generations in the current cultural context. Organized religion is in decline in North America and Europe precisely because new generations (as well as sizable slices of older generations) are unwilling for their spiritual lives to be controlled by institutionalized structures. They see spiritual fellowship and discussion as entirely in the personal sphere.

If it is necessary to reach new generations with this sense of religion as highly personal by encouraging informal activities by believers, are we willing to take that risk? Or is it more important to try to maintain some kind of control over lay activities?

Is there any real risk in the arena of informal small group activities? Is there any real legal basis for liability for the denomination if the participants in these activities operate in terms of the personal and informal? Is there a greater basis for concern that defensive attitudes on the part of institutional structures will become a barrier to the mission of Christ in our contemporary cultural context, in reaching new generations?

2. *The handling of tithe*: Will small house churches handle donations of tithe and other offerings in a way that honors denominational policy and the intentions of the donors? There have been several years of experimentation in a number of local conferences in the North American Division that have proven to provide ways in which small, informal house churches send tithe to the conference. The fact that the conference does not pay for leadership personnel in these groups has not proven to be any more reason for participants to object to sending tithe to the conference than it is among members of conventional congregations with denominational employees on their pastoral staff.

There is a concern among today's younger generations that too much of the funding given to the denomination is consumed by essentially bureaucratic activities, but this concern has been around for a long time and to assign it specifically to the house church concept is simply not fair or realistic. And there is ample opportunity with the communication tools available today through the Internet to address these concerns and seek support for the many important ministries which the denomination

funds. The direct giving system that the denomination has had in place for several years provides a way for donors to make sure that their giving goes where it is intended. The experiments with informal house churches that are already in place among Adventists have demonstrated that this approach to church is no more likely to be a problem in terms of support for the Tithe Fund than are the attitudes of some members of conventional congregations that have been in place for nearly a century.

3. *The doctrinal integrity of baptism:* There is the temptation for small, informal groups to baptize individuals in an informal setting without assuring that they are recorded as members of the denomination or that they recognize that they are joining the larger structure of the denomination. Experiments with the informal house church as an approach to mission have shown that this is, in fact, no greater problem than it has been for many decades among conventional congregations and established church structures. It is a well-known reality among denominational administrators that evangelists sometimes baptize individuals who are not officially entered on the denomination's membership records. Some of these situations have to do with individuals who have an objection to membership in a denomination, and many of these individuals later choose to regularize their membership while some do not. It has not proven to be a major barrier to the success of public evangelism as it is conventionally implemented. The recent experiments with informal house churches have not revealed any greater likelihood of a problem.

It is also true that in frontier missions over the past century or more there have always been a segment of the converts who are not comfortable with joining the denomination at the time of their baptism. This has never been a barrier to the ongoing Adventist mission or the use of methods and approaches that best fit particular cultural contexts. Is it really fair to use this reality as a reason to block an approach that appears to provide the most effective way to reach new generations in the cultural context of today?

4. *A dual operating system cannot be in parallel; it must be under the authority of the existing denominational system.* In fact, long ago the Seventh-day Adventist denomination found an approach to this issue called "ASI." So-called "self-supporting" missionary activities have long existed and have been acceptable to the denomination so long as they were supportive of the denomination. The same kind of solution exists for the new phenomena of informal house churches through the Simple Church organization.

Many of the people who prefer an informal house church may be uncomfortable with personally recognizing the "authority" of a denomination. This is also not an unfamiliar situation for Adventists considering all the years we have pointed out the unbiblical authority assumed by

the papacy and other episcopal entities. Do we want to make a barrier for reaching new generations out of an attitude of preference for faith outside of authoritative structures? Is there really something wrong with making room for people who prefer not to be under the “authority” of any religious structure? So long as these informal house churches are not institutionalized structures, do not own and operate business enterprises and nonprofit institutions is there really any conflict with the denomination?

Is it possible that we can make institutionalized religious structure like that of denominational organizations and policies into a kind of idol if we allow them to become barriers to the mission of Christ simply because of changing cultural contexts? By asking this question I do not want to be read as disrespectful of denominational leadership. I spent much of my career as a denominational employee of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in jobs in local conferences, union conferences, and the North American Division of the General Conference. I know personally that many of us labor in these roles with a strong personal commitment to advancing the mission of Jesus Christ in the world.

Nonetheless, we have come to a point in history where negative attitudes toward institutionalized, bureaucratic structures are widespread and growing. It should not be surprising that some people want their personal faith and spiritual life to exist outside of such structures. And it should not be surprising that some of these people are attracted to the Adventist message. Is it not possible that the informal house church provides a place for us to evangelize them, disciple them, and support their mission to others with similar attitudes?

Will we miss an opportunity opened by the Holy Spirit if we ignore the house church phenomenon? German missiologist Wolfgang Simson has published a global status report on house churches, and he sees them as “the fastest growing expression of Christ-followers on the planet.” He points out that house churches like we read about in Acts have been present throughout church history, and these groups have often been sidelined and even persecuted by the larger and more powerful church structures (2009).

Many Adventists involved in missions in Europe and North America, as well as elsewhere in urban contexts have felt, in recent years, that the cultural context is more and more difficult. There seems to be growing resistance, growing barriers to the way we have implemented evangelism and church planting. If the informal house church offers a tool for progress in the contemporary cultural context is there really any good reason to ignore it or prohibit it? Should we not welcome it as a solution to current barriers to Christ’s mission among secular, urban people?

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