

Cell church, BEC, house church

Today there are three main movements, each advocating in different ways a return to a cell-based, house-centred church. Most of those movements would say: 'Cell and celebration are important, but the congregation is quite dispensable.' The three different streams are:

- 1 The classic 'cell church' advocated, for example, by Ralph Neighbour, Bill Beckham, or Yonggi Cho.
- 2 The Base-Ecclesial Community, mostly within the Roman Catholic Church.
- 3 The House-Church Movement, maybe best known today from China and Vietnam.

While the cell church looks and sounds almost the same as the house-church movement, it is not. There are very significant and vital differences, which I will point out later. The Base-Ecclesial Community is a long-lasting small group experiment within the Roman Catholic Church, and might very well develop into a cell-church structure within that church. There is not room here, however, to discuss this more deeply, as my main intention is to focus on generic house churches.

Advantages of house churches over traditional churches

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

1 Discipled multiplication

House church is a model centred on multiplication and discipleship with huge growth potential, because the 'cell' is the multipliable unit itself. Mentoring,

multiplication and discipleship is the heart of the concept. Congregation is not by definition a discipleship model and structurally tends to prevent mentoring and discipleship. Discipleship never really is only one-to-one: it is a function of community. Next to the Holy Spirit, peer pressure may be the strongest teacher on earth, as any parent of teenagers will agree. The house churches allow for a redeemed use of peer pressure, living out a healthy and loving accountability with each other, learning new kingdom values from each other and, being friends and family with each other, helping each other to live out together the new lifestyle; no one is left to individual and secret struggles, and each therefore quickly matures.

2 Persecution-proof structure

Through their small and flexible way of life and their persecution-proof spirit, house churches can develop into an almost persecution-proof structure – or at least persecution-resistant – as opposed to the very visible and immovable traditional 'church with a cross on its steeple'.

3 Freedom from church growth barriers

Once careful attention is given to prevent house churches from moving from an organic to an organizational mode, house churches can be multiplied through mitosis, an organic cell-reproduction process, and the overall growth of a movement is virtually free from church growth barriers.

4 Involvement of many more people more efficiently

Congregations are often programme-based, where most programmes are organized at the congregational level. They have proved to be quite inefficient and resource

hungry, usually involving 20 per cent of exhausted members of the church doing the work for the other, more passive, 80 per cent. In the house church, almost everyone can be easily and naturally involved, and dead wood is cut out. Since involved people are fulfilled and therefore happy people, the overall quality – and efficiency – of the church grows.

5 Breaking the pastoral care dilemma

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

6 Providing a place of life transformation and accountability

The house church is an ideal setting to change values, transfer life and therefore transform lifestyles. An analysis of the western church shows that the congregational model is almost totally ineffective at changing basic values and lifestyles. Many Christians end up with the same lifestyle of people around them, and therefore become indistinguishable from society and lose their prophetic edge. House churches provide a place of radical transformation of values and reordering of life, offering mutual and organic accountability, where redeemed peer pressure is made to function for good, and not for bad.

7 The house is a most effective place for new Christians

Much has been written about the inward-looking mentality of the congregational church, whereby the church and its programmes are the centre, and everything else rotates around this hub. This structure traditionally resents new people coming in, 'messing up the order and the

situation'. The congregation is, statistically speaking, a most unfriendly zone for new Christians, accounting for unbelievably large drop-out rates of up to 99 per cent in so-called 'evangelistic follow-up programmes'. In contrast, the cell or house church is a most effective, natural and welcoming zone for new people to come and stay in touch with the Christian community. It provides spiritual fathers and mothers, not teachers and paper. It also reverses the general direction of the perspective of Christians: instead of getting people to the church, they are getting the church to the people.

8 Solving the leadership crisis

House churches are led by elders, and they are just that: older than most, without necessarily being 'elderly'. Elders do not have to be skilled Masters of Ceremonies and learned teachers: modest and authentic fathers and mothers with obedient children will do nicely to start with. They are by then already many years into living a maturing life and passing the test of time, not graduates from a seminary able to perform some religious functions. This leadership is easy to find and develop anywhere without time-consuming schools for religious specialists. It depends on initial and ongoing apostolic and prophetic input and support, ministries which in themselves can be multiplied and therefore match and grow exponentially with a multiplying house-church movement. Traditional Sunday Schools, Bible Schools and seminaries are mostly static, addition-based leadership development systems which grow, at best, in a linear and not an exponential way. They are an informational system, not a transformational system, as Beckham rightly points out. Therefore they cannot match a multiplying movement of house churches with an exponentially growing need for elders.

9 Overcoming the clergy-laity division

'Nowhere in the New Testament do we find references to a pastor leading a congregation,' says Barney Coombes. The house church does not need a pastor in the traditional sense at all, because elders, functioning together with the corporate giftedness of the house church, maintain and multiply the life of the church. This therefore breaks the curse of the clergy-laity division, which the congregational system reinforces.

10 It is more biblical

The Bible absolutely does not teach us to say that a holy crowd gathering on a holy day at a holy hour in a holy sanctuary to participate in a holy ritual performed by holy men in holy clothes for a holy fee is a New Testament church.

We cannot afford to ignore biblical revelation for too long and get away with it. Tradition is a strong teacher, but God's word is more reliable and simply better. Even in an age of Postmodernism and relativity, the Bible still teaches absolutes.

The Bible absolutely does not teach us to say that a holy crowd gathering on a holy day at a holy hour in a holy sanctuary to participate in a holy ritual performed by holy men in holy clothes for a holy fee is a New Testament church. God's work done God's way still attracts God's blessing. Even in Moses' time God exhorted him to build 'according to the pattern'. It is worth struggling even with our own trusted tradition for the purpose of regaining biblical truth, because it is not tradition which sets us free, but the truth of God's word.

11 It is undeniably cheaper

The congregational church can be defined as 'plot plus building plus priest plus salary plus programmes'. The

house church is 'people plus ordinary houses plus faith plus shared life', which is undeniably cheaper. As congregational churches cost enormous sums of money to establish, and more money to maintain and to propagate, the cells and house churches literally make money, because they produce more than they consume. In an age when there seems to be an endless cry for more money for 'the work of church', we should not overlook alternatives but be good stewards of the financial talents that God gives us.

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12 It resurrects the city church

I see the present church organized into 4 levels:

- a. the house (where organic fellowship is possible, irrespective of what we call it);
- b. the congregational church (the traditional meeting-oriented denominational church);
- c. the city or region;
- d. the denomination (the network, conference or organisation of denominational churches of an area).

While the traditional church is typically focused on two levels (b and d), the cell church would be focused on a and b. The house church, however, allows us to regain a focus on a and c. The church in the New Testament was named according to its geographical location, not denomination. With a new wave of house churches, this also opens up a way back to the 'city church', literally the church of the city – all Christians of a city or region

together, meeting regularly or irregularly in city-wide celebrations, where the city's most gifted Christians and humble servants of the Lamb forget all titles and politics and, in a new maturity, sacrifice their own name, denominationalism, reputation and single-handed success to the single advancement of the Kingdom of only one King, the Lamb of God.

Imagine the public tumult when this collective, city-based and authentic leadership regularly provides prophetic vision, teaches apostolic standards, stands united, blesses each other and speaks to the world with one voice. What the devil has tried hard to prevent at any cost will again come true: 'the Romans', 'the Ephesians', 'the Corinthians', 'the church of Jerusalem', Vienna, Singapore, Baghdad, Khartoum or Montevideo will reconnect with each other, each forming itself into a supernatural corporate identity and movement under one single Lord and Master, and speaking with a collective and powerful voice to its city and nation.

What happens at the small level of house churches will eventually spill over on a larger, city scale, where the church will 'excel at the small and therefore excel at the large'. Instead of Christians being regularly excited top-down through imported motivators and speakers at artificial conferences based on names and topics, the healthy, authentic and infectious joy and excitement at the house level will bubble up and express itself city-wide, where no one can miss it any more, and people will repeat the statement made first in Jerusalem: 'You have filled our city with your teaching!' And if ever God should choose to repeat instances as at Pentecost, where 120 upper-room Christians suddenly face the challenge of accommodating 3000 converts in one day, they would be prepared, because the flexible structure of multiplying house churches would already be in place.

In many areas of the world, local and regional pastoral fellowships and prayer networks are emerging. I believe this can be the beginning of a regional process, a Spirit-led, intuitive and slow convergence of people with like-minded spirits, which creates healthy relationships first, which leads to the formation of a collective spiritual identity, a vessel of unity, into which, at a special *kairos*-point in history, a greater challenge can be placed: collectively to take on the challenge of discipling our city or region – together!

