

## Simple Church Explosion

by Tom Wymore

In June, 2006, leading Christian researcher, George Barna, published results of a survey which indicated that the number of people attending “house churches” is increasing at a remarkable rate. The survey revealed that 9% of adults attend a house church during a typical week. This is up from just 1% a decade ago. Follow-up research by Barna, based on narrower definitions, still confirms very rapid growth. What on earth and in heaven is happening?

Before we answer that question, maybe we should ask whether we need to answer it at all. I would suggest that our spiritual DNA requires us to say, “Yes!” If we are committed to hearing what the Spirit is saying to the Church and to embracing the new things that God is doing, we need to take notice of this trend. If this is one of God’s “new things,” and it appears that it is, then I am sure that you will want to be in the front of the line to receive and act on what the Spirit is saying to the Church! Furthermore, the desire to be reaching as many people as possible with the Good News compels us to be open to new ways of reaching the Harvest. The call to the simpler structures often called house churches is not the only thing that God is saying to His people right now, but it seems to be a significant part of what He is saying and doing. So I ask again, “What on earth and in heaven is happening?”

There are many factors in our culture and the Kingdom of God that are spawning this move towards house churches (or simple churches, which is the term I will use throughout this article.) While the various cultural factors are significant—factors such as the desire for simplicity and the hunger for deep and meaningful relationships—let’s focus our attention on what are some of the Kingdom factors (spiritual and missional) behind this movement.

One clearly spiritual factor is that God is stirring up a renewed desire in His people for intimacy with Him. Books about intimacy with God have proliferated greatly in recent years, and everywhere hearts are longing for a closer, truly experiential relationship with Him. And while it may not be the only answer, simple church in its healthiest expressions has intimacy at the core of everything and is in step with this stirring by God’s Spirit.

A second Kingdom factor (also present in our society) is a renewed emphasis upon prioritizing the family. We have seen attempts to address this trend in our nation over the past few years (daycare at workplaces, an endless parade of sports events for children, etc.), but these attempts have failed to get to the heart of the issue: husbands and wives, parents and children must spend lots of time together in relaxed and naturally relational settings for real family life to develop. Again, while they may not be God’s only answer, simple churches typically encourage the family to be together during their gatherings. They also place the primary responsibility for the spiritual nurture of children on their parents (sounds biblical, eh?). Simple churches also have light and flexible schedules for their gatherings, leaving room in busy schedules for families to spend time together.

A third Kingdom factor that God is birthing in folks is a desire for 24/7 commitment to Him. As people have prayed for revival over the years, God has begun answering that by creating a longing within myriads of believers for a life that radiates His presence all the time, everywhere. Traditional expressions of the church may help foster this, of course, but more and more people seem to be heading for a simpler life, and simpler expressions of the church, to aid them in their quest to become true followers of Jesus. Perhaps the complexity and busy-ness of our society is compelling folks to re-examine things and put their time into simpler things across the board.

A fourth Kingdom factor arises out of globalization. As our world has shrunk and our awareness of others on the globe has increased, more and more North American believers have become conscious of the wonderfully compelling and remarkably vibrant faith of their brothers and sisters in other countries. Further investigation of this vitality often results in the discovery of simple house church networks as the primary or only expression of church life. There seems to be a connection, at least in the minds of an increasing number of people, between simplicity and vitality as illustrated by our brothers and sisters overseas.

A fifth Kingdom factor is the revelation from the Lord of the Harvest that we need more ways to reach the Harvest! We all know that we are not reaching *all* of the Harvest that is out there. Many of you also know that the US is the third or fourth largest mission field in the world (based on the number of unconverted people). Current methods of “reaching the Harvest” need to be augmented by newer, more flexible ways to reach people. Simple expressions of the church represent a fresh, wonderfully flexible, rapidly expanding means of reaching people in every nook and cranny of our nation with minimal expense and maximum transformative power! Because they don’t require buildings, they can proliferate in places where real estate is prohibitively expensive or otherwise unavailable. Because of their simple but effective leadership structures, they can rapidly deploy new leaders, training them on the fly via relational discipleship models, reaching the abundant Harvest quicker. Because they are flexible, they can be planted in any number of different cultures and adapt to that culture without diluting the gospel or the discipleship process. You get the picture, I think—simple churches are a powerful new expression of making disciples of all ethnic groups, all nations.

Now that I have said all this, please hear what we in the simple church world are *not* saying. We are *not* saying that more traditional forms of church can’t also address these issues and needs. Churches that emphasize small groups, intergenerational ministry, simpler approaches to program, etc., can also address these issues. Indeed, Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger have written a book directed towards traditional churches that encourages a move towards simplicity. Their choice for their title—*Simple Church*—is unfortunate because the book is addressed not to simple churches but to traditional churches, but the book rightly directs church leaders to a simpler, saner approach to life and ministry.

Another thing we in the simple church world are *not* saying is that we are the *only* expression of God’s Kingdom. Early house church movements in the United States tended to take a harsh and critical view of the institutional church. But the newer expressions of simple church are more Kingdom-oriented and desire to embrace, cooperate and partner with what many of us in the simple church family call “legacy churches.” There are a growing number of stories being written that describe cooperative efforts between institutional and simple churches. While we hold strong convictions about the need for simple church life, we are aware that this **is** taking place in many of our legacy churches. Conversations with pastors of legacy churches have also revealed a deepening hunger for these intimate and simpler expressions of faith.

So what does all this mean to you? The answer to that depends upon what God says to you. In my opinion, the simple church movement will not only be a *partner* to legacy churches, but also a *prophet*, and we always do well to listen to what God is saying through his prophets. At the very least, then, we suggest that you make yourself aware of what’s going on around you. George Barna is almost certainly correct in his prediction that the number of simpler expressions of the church will increase vastly over the next several decades. We ignore this fact at the cost of watching a large portion of God’s kingdom march right past us! Both culture and kingdom are telling us that some of the new wineskins God plans to pour His new wine into will involve very different, new (yet old) expressions of the church. So if God speaks to your heart about simple church, explore in His presence what *He* wants your next steps to be. After all, everyone can benefit from more simplicity in his/her life! And God’s word to the entire Body of Christ right now, regardless of its form, is a clear call to humility, intimacy, community and a return to being the salt and light in our communities.

Link to the Barna article I quoted above.

<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=241>

Link to follow up article by Barna (January 8, 2007)

<http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=255>

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