

The House Church Movement in the USA: Why Do Christians Leave the “Institutional Church”?

Stephen J. Padilla, Wayland Baptist University

Introduction

For decades, some Christians have been leaving traditional church settings. Not all see themselves as leaving Christianity, but are instead choosing different expressions of their faith. Many different people report many different reasons for leaving, not the least of which are misgivings of some sort. Others cite a biblical basis for their choice. Some go to small groups and house churches in addition to large, corporate worship in a church building. Others have completely abandoned anything that resembles a typical church in the USA and other western, English-speaking nations.

Why are they leaving? When they leave, where are they going? While the percentage of Christians in the USA who are worshiping in individual family homes instead of corporately owned structures may be small, it is still a significant number. Based on a review of extant literature on the subject—paltry though it may be—it can be seen that, much like the New Atheist movement, the house church movement¹ in the English-speaking world is predominately a movement of rejection and departure, rather than one of attraction and embracing.

Background

The house church movement in the English-speaking world began in the 1960s “in the wake of the Charismatic Movement.”² (The house church movement is also known as Restorationism,³ and is a subset of the Emerging Church movement.⁴) After referencing First Century practices and describing certain early

1 Bird, Warren. *House Church Movement*. n.p.: CQ Press, A Division of Sage Publications, Inc, 2010. “Common alternate titles are *simple church*, *open church*, *organic church*, *relational church*, *primitive church*, *body lift church*, *micro church*, *koinos church* [sic] ... and *biblical church*. House churches are not the same as small groups or cell groups associated with a conventional church. House churches may network with other house churches, but each views itself as a complete church, not a subunit of a larger church. Some see themselves as deliberate alternatives to traditional or established churches.”

2 Chrissides, George D., *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*. 2nd ed. (Plymouth, UK: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2012.), 167.

3 *Ibid.*

4 cf. Packard, Josh, and George C. Sanders. 2013. "The emerging church as corporatization's line of flight." *Journal Of Contemporary Religion* 28, no. 3: 437-455

Members of the house church movement often deny being part of the Emerging Church movement.

For simplicity's sake, “house church movement” will be the term used here for the proliferation of the

movements (like the hermetic movement) and certain practices in the Middle Ages, Barnett admits that the current house church movement did begin with the Jesus Movement in the 1960s.⁵ While this movement does not represent a majority, in 2004, Strom quoted pollster George Barna as saying, “It is surprising to find that roughly 10 million born again Christian adults [in the US] are unchurched.”⁶ This means that a significant portion of the US population who self-identify as Christians—not apostates who have abandoned Christianity—are attending worship outside of traditionally accepted venues.⁷

This movement often uses the term “organic church”⁸ to refer to themselves and “institutional church” to refer to traditional congregations that attend formal worship in a building and who are led by a professional pastor. (It is quite noteworthy that some choose to use these terms because *organic* has a healthy connotation and *institutional*⁹ is a term that tends to grate against American sensibilities. Taken in certain contexts, *institutional church*¹⁰ is even used as a

tendency to attend Christian corporate worship in a privately owned residence instead of in a traditional church building. In this study, *house church movement* applies to the English-speaking world and does not apply to the proliferation of house churches in countries where Christian worship is in any way suppressed or restricted by official government policies or by tacit approval of local traditions which cause Christians to fear for their safety. The main focus is on the house church movement in the USA, but makes reference to the English-speaking western world in general, as English language writings from all are affecting the growth of this movement in the USA, as well as abroad.

- 5 Barnett in Zdero, Rad. *Nexus: The World House Church Movement Reader*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2007.), 162-4. (hereafter “in Zdero”)
- 6 Strom, Andrew. *The “Out-of-Church” Christians*. [online book], available from <http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~revival/00-Out-Of-Church.html>
- 7 In the chapter draft “Atheists, Agnostics, and Apostates” for the *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, Heinz Streib and Constantin Klein note that “[i]n the U.S., less than 50% report a stable religious affiliation. However, this reflects a large number of religious switchers (33.1%) rather than a large number of non-affiliates.” Furthermore, “another 30% leave organized religion for privatized or heretical forms of religiosity,” which includes the house church movement. Much like that which has been found to be true in atheism, “[s]ecure parent-child attachments can thus lead to more stable religiosity, whereas distant or avoidant relationships between parent and child increase the likelihood of sudden conversions and religious switching or of secular exits.” Though not subject of this study, it should be noted that some may switch away from something due to psychological reasons that have little to do with the actuality of any given situation.
- 8 Dillistone, F W. 1948. “Church union--organic or federal?: a major issue confronting Lambeth and Amsterdam.” *Theology Today* 5, no. 2: 186-198. It appears the term “organic church” may have been coined as early as 1945 by Scottish Major and lawyer Hector Burn-Murdoch in his book, *Church, Continuity and Unity*.
- 9 Tenny-Brittian, William. *House Church Manual*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004. In his introduction to this book, Bill Easum says that “we are entering an anti-institutional world, where the traditional form of 'church' is being rejected as plastic, uncaring, and unauthentic.”
- 10 *Ibid.*, ix. Tenny-Brittian's term of choice is “landed church.”

pejorative by some.¹¹) When speaking of the house church movement, and of house churches in general, it is important to remember that there is a very significant limitation on the size of the group. Barrett suggests that seven to twelve people is typical.¹² All that can be reasonably accommodated must fit into a typical family dwelling, and if they are to remain true to their movement,¹³ the group must remain small enough to facilitate easy communication among all individuals at all times during any gatherings.

Some in the movement have been influenced by the writings of earlier subject matter experts, like Gene Edwards. Others have been influenced by more recently published authors, like Frank Viola. Some authors are more vitriolic and some are more encouraging. As with other life choices, some choose for intellectual reasons and some choose for emotional reasons. Little research has been done so far in this field, although there is some literature that can be used as a starting point. This study can be considered a comprehensive—though not exhaustive—review of authors within the field of the house church movement, both of adherents and of external observers.

Why They Go

Green says that “[i]t cannot be denied that the church in Europe and to a considerable extent in North America is in bad shape, and in Australia and New Zealand it is worse.”¹⁴ He goes on to note that between 80,000 and 100,000 people every day become Christians, but that most of those people are in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. This does not appear to be due to a lack of spirituality or due to an increase in secularism in the western world (although many traditional churchgoers are quick to blame rising secularism), but due to some failure in the established church systems.¹⁵ Some would have it that we in the West—particularly the English-speaking West—have gone astray in our approach to Christianity and the church. They feel dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs and look to history and look overseas for models of healthy church growth and healthy worship practices.

11 cf. Viola, Frank, and George Barna. *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices*. Carol Stream, Ill.: BarnaBooks, 2008.

12 Barrett, Lois. *Building the House Church*. (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1986.)

13 The house church movement considers the priesthood of all believers to be a core tenet. (cf. 1 Peter 2:5-9) All must be free to speak at any given time about any given thing. Generally despising things like liturgy and order of worship, house church attendees have no set meeting agenda style. In practice, the gatherings develop traditions of worship, but committing something to paper—such as an order of worship—would be offensive.

14 Green, Michael, ed. *Church Without Walls: A Global Examination of Cell Church*. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002.), ix.

15 *Ibid.*, x-xi.

In New Zealand, Strom began his research into this quite by accident, having spoken on a radio show, and then having written an e-mail article for distribution by his house church network, in March 2003. He received hundreds upon hundreds of e-mail responses from around the English-speaking world. These respondents were people describing their own experiences in leaving traditional churches for house churches.¹⁶ Notably, people were joining the house church movement as a reaction to a real or perceived wrong within either their own specific congregations or within the traditional church in general.¹⁷ As such, it is a movement of rejecting more than a movement of embracing. Dissatisfaction drives the growth of the house church movement.

Pastor Alan Jamieson, also in New Zealand, who authored *A Churchless Faith*, noted that “94% of the 'out-of-church' Christians¹⁸ he interviewed had been leaders of some kind—such as deacons, elders or Sunday school teachers—and 40% had been full-time Christian workers.” Furthermore, these people had left not because they had lost their faith but because they were trying to save the faith. Some spoke of becoming weary of “playing church” or of “playing the game.” Others mentioned problems with works-based approaches to liturgy and programs. Some tired of routine. Apparent hypocrisy was, predictably, also a noteworthy theme, citing the double-standards of certain people in leadership—especially pastors—living one type of lifestyle while preaching another. “[P]roblems with the leadership” was a significant factor, with many noting issues of control and spiritual abuse.¹⁹ Some asked “Where is God in all of this?” when they observed “all the programs, church-growth techniques, building-funds [*sic*] and systems found in today's churches.” Man-made institutions seem, in their eyes, to have taken over God-ordained communities.²⁰ Rather than attempt to fix the existing structures and systems, as the Reformers of old attempted, the leavers find the traditional church to be broken beyond repair. “The old wineskins cannot hold the new wine of the revival.”²¹

House churches see themselves as “not only fueling worldwide church growth but ... also helping people grow spiritually. Home churches produce ownership, accountability, spontaneity, involvement, responsibility and growth among

16 Strom himself left traditional church for a period of 9 years, based on his perception of a specific call to a “wilderness' experience.”

17 Strom.

18 This is Strom's term for those who have left traditional churches, but still consider themselves to be Christians, whether or not they attend a non-traditional church or avoid corporate worship.

19 “Sadly, particularly amongst Pentecostals in recent years, control and spiritual abuse seem to have become more and more prevalent. It is the mis-use [*sic*] of terms like covering, submission and authority that have often led to these problems.”

20 Strom.

21 Hollenweger, Walter J. 1980. “The house church movement in Great Britain.” *Expository Times* 92, no. 2: 45-47. Referring to wineskins, *cf.* Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:21-22, and Luke 5:33-39.

attendees.”²² In keeping with ideas about restoration, reformation, and revival, the house church movement sees itself at the forefront of making good that which has gone badly. The adherents see a broken church failing to properly serve a fallen world and failing to correctly worship God, and thus see themselves as heroically standing against the *status quo* to bring Christianity back to the feet of the Christ, as viewed in their own interpretations of the New Testament.

As restorationists, the house church movement congregants see themselves as following a healthy tradition of renewal within the church universal. Krupp and Woodrum bring forth the Montanists (156-400 AD), hermetic and monastic Christian communities (280-550 AD), Priscillian in Spain, Portugal, and France (340-385 AD), the Celtic missionary movement (432-800 AD), the Waldenses (1100-1300 AD), the mystics in France, England, Italy, Germany, Spain, Holland, and Belgium (1100-1500 AD), St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226 AD), John Wycliffe and the Lollards (1324-1384 AD), John Hus (1369-1415 AD), and Savonarola (1452-1498 AD) as examples of the historicity of “church revitalization movements using house churches and small groups.”²³ Further, Bunto speaks of Martin Luther (1483-1546 AD), the Radical Reformation (16th Century), Martin Bucer (1491-1551 AD), the Puritans (16th and 17th Centuries), the Quakers (17th Century), the Pietists (17th Century), the Moravians (18th Century), and the Methodists (18th Century) as evidence that church should be organic and experiential, not to mention small. He believes in the priesthood of all believers, noting that volunteerism and spiritual growth work best in small groups. Mutual confession can thrive in a smaller group, as can healthy church discipline (*vice* spiritual abuse, control, and manipulation).²⁴ It seems the house church movement has a great desire to identify itself with honorable traditions of restoration movements within the church, rather than to be seen as merely a subset of the Emerging Church movement or as a trendy movement that started as recently as the 1960s.²⁵

Not all, however, seem to be malcontents. Several, like Strom himself, felt they had been “‘called out’ by God.”²⁶ Certain individuals cite biblical reasons for

22 Kreider, Larry, and Floyd McClung. *Starting a House Church*. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2007.), 6.

23 Krupp and Woodrum in Zdero, 194-201.

24 Bunto in Zdero, 202-219.

25 Possibly, these feelings are due to some of the less admirable aspects of other movements started in the 1960s. It is quite reasonable to wish to distance oneself from much of the subculture in the English-speaking world of the 1960s and early 1970s. (At the risk of sounding pejorative, this could also be akin to the Wiccan and Neo-Pagan desires to be seen as continuations of ancient religions, rather than of ideas that were invented in the early Twentieth Century in Britain almost single-handedly by Gerald Gardner.)

26 Admittedly, Strom had his moments of discontent. He describes his years out of traditional church as a “wilderness experience” where God was growing him and guiding him to shed his arrogance and pride—two issues often noted by outsiders when observing the house church movement. Many perceive the house church movement as considering itself the only true church,

leaving, claiming that traditional congregations are not following the model established by Scriptures. Some who leave only leave for a certain time period, and then return, if not to their original churches then to another, yet still traditional, form of congregation.

Strom himself was only away from traditional church congregations for 9 years.²⁷ There is no specific reason to believe that any given person who leaves must be dissatisfied, and less reason to believe that he or she will never be back. In fact, not all who leave actually completely abandon traditional church. Many retain “allegiance to denominational churches.”²⁸ Rather than simply abandoning all forms of traditional church, Kreider suggests that downsizing could be a way to reform and revitalize traditional church congregations.²⁹ This, however, is the exception rather than the norm.

White criticizes traditional churches for putting functions ahead of relationships, for treating symptoms instead of causes.³⁰ Tenny-Brittian cites a variety of sources to bolster his claim that the house church movement is categorically superior to traditional church congregations. He points out that evangelism is losing out to attrition, with three times as many churches closing every year than there are new churches opening.³¹ He says that “it takes the combined efforts of eighty-five Christians over the period of one year to produce one convert to the faith,” and that \$1,551,466 are spent for every new convert. He then compares this with the growth of Christianity in other parts of the world, especially Africa and India.³² While these figures may be suspect, and there may be a bit of false comparison by invoking non-western cultures with regard to a western problem, it remains a fact that these are the perceptions that are being promulgated within the house church movement.

Krupp & Woodrum list a series of “unfortunate decisions made by the Early Church Fathers” and, like the majority of critics, cite many Constantinian woes:

Eventually, the Roman emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in the fourth century AD and offered the church power, prestige, and position, which led to state-church partnership, special church buildings, a rigid clergy

which is ironically one of the complaints by house church congregants about denominationalism.

27 Strom.

28 Hollenweger, 47, and Barrett, 25.

29 Kreider in Zdero, 483.

30 White in Zdero, 476-477.

31 Presumably in the USA.

32 Tenny-Brittian, 2.

system, and an influx of formalism and laxity³³ into the churches. This reached a low point during the Dark Ages, which saw the established Roman Catholic church introduce special clergy clothing (500), image and relic worship (786), holy water (850), canonization of dead saints (995), celibacy of the priesthood (1097), religious crusades and persecution of heretics (1000-1600), the teaching of purgatory (1439), and the eventual placement of church tradition on an equal footing with the Bible (1545).³⁴

Zdero likewise blames Constantine for much, such as creation of the Nicene Creed, formal church buildings, and the rise of the professional clergy. He sees these as having negative impacts on the “freedom..., faith..., form..., [and] function” of the church.³⁵ Shrouf echoes the Constantinian concerns, highlighting the “priesthood of all believers” and proposing a model that is “experiential..., participatory..., image-driven...,” and focusing on “connectivity.”³⁶

In addition to Constantinian issues, Zdero further finds problems in the financing of traditional churches and the systems and structures associated with said. For local house churches, he points out that “the New Testament encourages local volunteerism,” such that pastors should be unpaid volunteers and that everyone should minister. House churches should also be small and simple, and while local resources may be limited, outside funding should be avoided because it causes dependence.³⁷ The house church movement, whether in networks or in isolation, prizes independence above all other things in their structures and organizations. They want the freedom to do as they see fit, when they see fit. (This desire for liberty is not always libertine, but that is a natural possible result of such radical independence from oversight and supervision.)

Many who had left traditional church felt liberated. Others spoke of feeling a greater “intimacy’ with Jesus” after leaving traditional congregations.³⁸ There are needs being met by house churches that are not being met in traditional churches. Congregants tend to be on a “lifelong spiritual quest,” seeking real worship and honest prayer. Some find freedom from oppression based on categories like gender. Others even find freedom from marginalization due to sexual preferences. They can share honestly and openly, gaining identity from inclusion instead of exclusion. With

33 Concurrent complaints of formalism and laxity may seem paradoxical, but in this instance, the authors complain of formalism in worship and laxity in moral standards.

34 Krupp and Woodrum in Zdero, 171.

35 Zdero in Zdero, 186-193.

36 Shrouf in Zdero, 459-463. *NOTE:* This creates the acronym EPIC.

37 *Ibid.*, 447-447. He does not, however, actually cite any New Testament passages to support his position, making the position appear suppositional.

38 Strom.

that, lacking any denominational constraints, house churches typically have open communion, offering the Eucharist to all who call themselves Christian.³⁹ In leaving traditional church, most—if not all—are restoring the idea of the communal meal.⁴⁰ In short, many find personal levels of freedom that they lacked in other church congregations, both from official denominational policies and from social norms within the congregations.

But this personal freedom comes at a price:

The trends are not all healthy for leaderless groups emerge that are satisfied with sharing personal experiences at the expense of biblical truth[.] This seems at great variance to the biblical pattern of “devotion to the apostles’ teaching.” Home groups can deteriorate into self indulgent exercises where the participant rules and the meeting must serve the felt needs of the members.⁴¹

House churches, especially those not participating in a house church network, are often poorly supervised. There can be issues of excessive leeway being given to people participating in manners that are detrimental to the group. They rely too much on subjective experiences rather than objective truths. There is room for spiritual abuse by the leadership.⁴² In short, house churches all too often start having the exact same types of problems the congregants were seeking to escape when they left the traditional churches and denominations. Lacking a formal training process for leaders who do not know the original biblical languages and who are not familiar with ancient near-eastern sociopolitical climates and Hebrew customs, the English Bible becomes the standard,⁴³ and as such opens the door for eisegesis. The leadership can devolve into a form of control and abuse that was typical in the European Christendom against which the Reformers worked, though naturally on a much smaller scale and unsupported by similarly corrupt civil governmental structures. Both the Gospels and the Epistles warn against false teachings and false prophets, and these were written during the First Century when house church movement adherents believe the original Christians were themselves meeting in

39 Bondi, Roberta C. 1994. "House Churches and Alternative Communities Within the Church." *Mid-Stream* 33, no. 4: 435-441.

40 Tenny-Brittian, 37, and Job in Zdero, 175. Some might point out the fact that Paul's admonition of the church in Corinth (*cf.* 1 Corinthians 11:20-22) effectively ended the types of communal meals that were mentioned in the book of Acts. Groups such as the Baptists that still have communal meals tend to hold the meals separately from the worship services.

41 Wilson, J. P. 2004. "From House Church to Home Groups." *Reformed Theological Review* 63, no. 1: 14. Note the phrase "felt needs."

42 *Ibid.*, 14-15.

43 The Protestant Reformation often prided itself on a return to *sola scriptura*. People in the English-speaking world who lack the education to properly exegete Scripture are at risk of creating a new standard: *sola scriptura anglica*.

house churches as the norm.

Where They Go

“All the early churches were small house-churches’.”⁴⁴ Regardless of motivation for the leaving, those who continue to attend corporate worship nearly universally cite New Testament⁴⁵ sources to bolster their choice to join—or found—a house church. While some claim that the archaeological evidence proves the early church was house-based,⁴⁶ others are not so certain. Within the house church movement, even Barrett admits that house churches were often remodeled to become dedicated buildings to accommodate larger congregations, and that “sanctuary-type buildings” were built over earlier house churches.⁴⁷ Recent scholarship shows that while there was an abundance of house churches, they were not normative for early church life. House churches were but one type of location among many. After reviewing over 330 sources, Adams concluded that only four uses of “the church at the home” can be found in the Pauline epistles. Rather than meeting in private homes, the early church mostly met in the workshop and storage spaces that were parts of large communal living centers, not the individual houses and apartments.⁴⁸ Other spaces that were commonly used by the early church include retail, industrial, and storage spaces (such as shops, workshops, barns, warehouses), commercial hospitality and leisure spaces (such as hotels and inns, rented dining rooms, bathhouses), and public outdoor spaces and burial places (such as gardens, watersides, urban open spaces, and tombs/catacombs).⁴⁹ Based on textual evidence—both biblical and extrabiblical—and on archaeological evidence, the earliest Christians were not exclusively in house churches; they were not even primarily in house churches. They met in whatever spaces could be made available, until such a time as they were able to begin constructing dedicated spaces.⁵⁰ The early Christians did not specifically select one type of worship space

44 Wilson, 1. Also, cf. Atkinson, Harley T., and Joel Comiskey. "Lessons From The Early House Church For Today's Cell Groups." *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 1: 75-87

45 Tenny-Brittian, 1. “The House Church is the only type of church mentioned in the New Testament.”

46 Wilson, 5 ff, and Job in Zdero, 175.

47 Barrett, 21.

48 Not likely to be mentioned by house church movement advocates, the majority of evidence that supports the idea of a large number of house churches in the First Century is to be found not in the canonical book of Acts but in the apocryphal Acts from the Second and Third Centuries, many of which are pseudepigraphical, Gnostic, or both.

49 Adams, Edward. *The Earliest Christian Meeting Places: Almost Exclusively Houses?* T and T Clark Library of Biblical Studies. London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2013.

50 Naturally, the level of usage of dedicated worship spaces as we know them today waxed and waned according to levels of official and/or sanctioned persecution against Christians, whether by majority Jewish populations, majority pagan populations, government persecution by Romans, or any other circumstance that would tend to drive the church underground, as is seen in areas like China today.

over another. They used whatever was available, based on practicalities such as occupancy of the space, ownership of the space, and ability to rent, buy, or build spaces.

Within the house church movement, some are, indeed, following these models, meeting—in addition to in homes—“in art galleries, coffee shops, warehouses, fast-food restaurants, industrial complexes, parks, and other unconventional places.”⁵¹ However, Strom points out that even at the very beginning of the Christian church, people were meeting outdoors. In fact, they were having huge meetings outdoors, with 3000 or more people gathering at Solomon's Porch (aka, the Court of the Gentiles).⁵² Edwards carefully crafted a historical supposition about worship in those days, and he did recognize the use of Solomon's Porch,⁵³ but still insisted that house church is the only appropriate biblical expression of Christian worship, as do many other advocates of the house church movement. The house church movement is not following the early biblical model of whole-city gatherings outdoors.

Fitts provided a compare-and-contrast argument for moving the church away from traditional settings. He lists forty trends,⁵⁴ presented here in table format, that nominally characterize movement from a large church building to privately owned or rented homes:

From	To
Sanctuaries	Streets
Christianity [<i>Christendom</i>]	Christ
Church Houses	House Churches
Upward Growth	Outward Growth
Professional Pastors	Home Grown Pastors
Special Day Christians	Every Day Christians
Hierarchy	Servant Leaders
Weekly Worship	Constant Worship
“Come to” Christianity	“Go to” Christianity

51 Kreider and McClung, 8.

52 Strom. He also notes that the Great Awakening, the Second Great Awakening, and the Great Revival of 1859 were all marked by large, outdoor gatherings.

53 Edwards, Gene. *Revolution: The Story of the Early Church*. Beaumont, TX: The SeedSowers, 1974.

54 Fitts in Zdero, 273-292.

From	To
Symbolism in the Lord's Supper	Reality in the Lord's Supper
Denominations	Spirit-led Networks
Social Respectability	Salt and Light
Performance	Participation
Temple-based Church	Home-based Church
Seminary System	Apprentice System
Tenth [<i>tithe</i>] Giving	Total Giving
Selective Submission	Total Submission
Titles	Function
Independence	Inter-dependence
Paper Membership	Body Membership
Wheel [<i>with spokes radiating</i>]	Vine [<i>with tendrils growing</i>]
Organizational Unity	Spiritual Unity
Seeking Patterns	Seeking Guidance
Us and Them	Us
Planned Church	Spontaneous Church
Bondage for Women	Freedom for Women
Old Covenant	New Covenant
Arbitrary Guidelines for Appointing Elders	Biblical Guidelines for Appointing Elders
My Pastor	My Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, and Pastor/Teachers
Raising Up Leaders	Appointing Servants
Local Vision	World Vision
Building My Empire	Building His Kingdom
Intellectualism	Supernatural Anointing
Rejecting One Another	Accepting One Another
Law Keeping	Living by Grace
Overwhelming Oversight	Restful Oversight
We Will Build	I Will Build
Programs	Prayer
Sinners	Saints

From	To
Religion	Relationship

This rather substantial list contains many words that can be considered trigger words, possibly even pejoratives. [Highlighted here, but representative of many writings examined, is an apparent dislike—if not disdain—for paid professional pastors and, by extension, the systems of eldership (or other leadership) used in some denominations.] This is not simply a movement toward a way that is perceived as superior, but a movement away from issues that are seen to plague the traditional churches. Specifically in Great Britain, the house church movement was part of a rejection of state-church relationships, with the Anglican Church dominating the Christian worship expression. Noble notes that, in the 1970s, “only 0.5% of the church in Britain could be described as Evangelical, let alone Pentecostal or Charismatic.”⁵⁵ American Christianity escaped the travails of an official state sanctioned church, but nonetheless developed its own problems that gave rise to a house church movement contemporaneous to the British movement. Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (as previously noted) have the beginnings of their house church movements at the same time, and largely for the same reasons as in both the USA and England. The overwhelming majority of those who leave traditional church in the English-speaking world do go to privately owned homes.

Kreider and McClung contend that “each generation must find its fit,” that it needs “the freedom to discover and discern which wineskin is best for it.”⁵⁶ Over the past two millenia, the church universal has met in a variety of locations and has instituted a variety of man-made systems for worship, both in context and in content. The size and structure of the meeting place varies according to the needs of the group, not according to a stricture from the New Testament. The church is about community, not about the location of a gathering.

Limitations

This research should be considered preliminary. This has been a review of extant literature that is rather scant. Further research is recommended, using statistical sampling and questionnaires sent to target groups.

Conclusion

Kreider and McClung quote house church planter Ralph Moore as saying, “We must beware of authors who live in anger toward the established church. ... The

55 Noble in Zdero, 343.

56 Kreider and McClung in Zdero, 14. Furthermore, they state that what this world needs is not specifically more house churches, but “more community churches, more mega-churches and more house churches networking together to reach those without Christ!”, 32.

anger of man still can't work the righteousness of God.”⁵⁷ It would be easy to select specific authors, such as Edwards and Viola,⁵⁸ and excoriate them for damaging the Body of Christ. The fact remains that they are simply responding to market pressure, whether crassly from a business standpoint of selling more books or from the point of responding to their own desires and feelings. The current house church movement in the USA—and in other English-speaking countries—started because people were unhappy with traditional church.

Leadership failures at the congregational and denominational levels have driven people away from traditional churches. While some have left church altogether, either eschewing corporate worship or (less commonly) renouncing Christianity, others have moved into smaller, less bureaucratic communities. There have been a variety of movements throughout the ages that have preceded the current house church movement, yet the traditional church carries on. In the event that this current trend passes in favor of another new expression of Christian worship, there will doubtless arise groups of people who abuse the system, and thus will create situations against which other groups of people will rebel. It is a repeating cycle of leaving and rejection, an unavoidable part of the human condition. Whether for good reasons or for bad reasons, a certain percentage of Christians will always be found who reject the establishment of the day. In the case of today's house church movement, this review indicates that most people leave traditional church because of personal and emotional reasons, but will gladly cite biblical rationale to support the decision. At the core of it all, the leavers leave because they are unhappy.

57 Kreider and McClung, 76. The “anger of man” statement refers to James 1:20, which states that “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” (*The Holy Bible*. The ESV Study Bible. Edited by Lane T. Dennis, Wayne Grudem, J. I. Packer, C. John Collins, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Justin Taylor. Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008.)

58 Edwards, Gene. *Revolution: The Story of the Early Church*. Beaumont, TX: The SeedSowers, 1974; Edwards, Gene. *The Silas Diary*. First Century Diaries. Jacksonville, FL: SeedSowers Pub., 1998; Edwards, Gene. *The Titus Diary*. First Century Diaries. Jacksonville, FL: SeedSowers, 1999; Edwards, Gene. *The Timothy Diary*. Jacksonville, FL: SeedSowers Pub., 2000; Edwards, Gene. *The Priscilla Diary*. First Century Diaries. Jacksonville, FL: SeedSowers, 2001; Viola, Frank, and George Barna. *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices*. Carol Stream, Ill.: BarnaBooks, 2008; Viola, Frank. *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008; Viola, Frank. *Finding Organic Church: A Comprehensive Guide to Starting and Sustaining Authentic Christian Communities*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009.

For any interested in a scholarly discourse about Frank Viola's doctrines, see Dr. Ben Witherington's blog posts:

<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/06/pagan-christianity-by-george-barna-and.html>

<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/07/pagan-christianityreview-part-two.html>

<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/07/pagan-christianityreview-part-three.html>

<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2008/07/pagan-christianityreview-part-four.html>

Witherington was one of the subject matter experts consulted by Viola in his research, but Witherington's findings and data were rejected, as they did not support Viola's foregone conclusions about what church should be, specifically with regard to the historical precedents for the house church movement.

Biographical Note

Stephen J. Padilla teaches high school science for night school—an alternative to help teenagers who have to work to support their families—at Southwest Preparatory School in San Antonio, TX. (He also substitute teaches all subjects in middle school and high school during the regular school day.) He graduated from Wayland Baptist University's Master of Christian Ministry program—where he occasionally fills in teaching Old Testament and Research Writing—after earning a Bachelor of Applied Science (also from WBU) in Scientific Analysis Technology (a non-traditional degree based on his Associate of Applied Science in same from the Community College of the Air Force). He is a member of Mensa and a life member of the Alpha Chi National College Honor Society. As a 25-year military veteran, he is also a life member of both the Air Force Association and the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States.

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