

## Re-imagining God and Mission in Australian Culture

### **'It's back to the future for the church - the force is with us!'** ***Home Church as Missional and Marketplace plantings of 'church' in the Australian culture***

*Our understanding of God influences the way we 'do church'. Conversely, the way we 'do church' can influence the way we view God and mission.*

#### **Introduction**

Some new ways of church are developing in the Australian culture that the earliest church would recognise. Traditional churches in some areas are being challenged to radically change; while for many Christians, moving aside from denominational structures has been the only way forward. For increasing numbers of people, becoming 'Home Church' in various forms is a way forward.

'Home Church' is a generic term referring to a lounge-room sized gathering that is everything that can be understood as church in relation to its life and witness. We say it is a generic term because it is not the venue that is descriptive, but rather, the way of being church in small, non-hierarchical, fully participatory, gatherings based on relationship with God and one another. Many Home Churches do not meet in homes, but are to be found on cattle stations, high rise flats, legal offices, corporate board rooms, cafes and pubs for instance. These small gatherings of church easily manage to be cross generational and cross cultural in many instances. The Sunday/Monday divide is broken down as real life is shared deeply.

Various reasons 'home churches' are emerging can be identified, but throughout this phenomenon people are being divested of unnecessary and unhelpful 'baggage' that hinders the development of church and mission

#### **Looking for clues in the earliest church.**

It is interesting to look briefly at the factors that influenced the dynamism of the earliest Church especially considering the rate of expansion in the first three centuries, as a backdrop to what we see happening globally in the Home Church movement today. Some factors can indicate reasons for the radical change in church in our day, but can also give us pointers for the future of this movement in our land. It also serves to give a Biblical basis for what we see happening.

By 'earliest church' I am referring to that of the first three centuries when, by and large the church met as small gatherings in homes. <sup>1</sup>In 313 A.D, Constantine

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<sup>1</sup>p.60 'The Global House Church Movement' Rad Zdero Ph.D (William Carey Library, Pasadena, California. [www.WCLBooks.com](http://www.WCLBooks.com)) Rad Zdero is co-founder of *House Church Canada* [www.housechurch.ca](http://www.housechurch.ca)

legalised Christianity with the Edict of Milan and began to institute changes that have affected the church to this day. He facilitated the establishment of a professional hierarchical clergy system modeled after Roman government and military systems, the construction of special church buildings, and a political state-church merger. Thus 'Cathedral' Christianity was born. Before this time, most scholars agree that the church met in the homes of its members. <sup>2</sup>'The early church minimized the complexity of its forms in order to maximize the effectiveness of its functions'.

From the book of Acts, we see Christians alive in the reality of the Risen Lord, operating with immediacy in listening and obedience to Him. No wonder the <sup>3</sup>'Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved'.

The life and witness of the church was based on the economic and social building block of society - the *oikos*. <sup>4</sup>*Oikos* is the Greek word in the Bible for 'household' and included not only the family, but also wider family members, servants, slaves and clients. The *oikos*, with its network of relationships already existing, and the inclusion of new Christians needing discipling, was the setting for the grassroots 'theology' of church that emerged based on the <sup>5</sup>'one anothers' we read in the New Testament. Mutual acceptance, admonition, agreement, building up, compassion, concern, devotion, encouragement, fellowship, forgiveness, greeting, harmony, honour, hospitality, humility, instruction, kindness, love, peaceability, prayer, service, submission and tolerance are all themes we see evidenced.<sup>6</sup>

A recurring theme we find in the New Testament church is couched in familial language. For a thorough treatment of this see <sup>7</sup>Robert Banks 'Paul's Idea of Community'. Terms such as <sup>8</sup>'household of faith' and <sup>9</sup>'household of God' refer to nothing less than God's family. Words such as 'brother/s', 'beloved brother', 'fathers', 'mothers' 'children', give a picture of church life based on close and loving relationships.

This relational way of church was based on as well as influenced, the way they viewed God. Their experience of relationship with the Risen Lord Jesus, and the encouragement He gave to his followers to relate to His Father as our Father, and even 'Abba Father'<sup>10</sup>, gave rise to a value they placed on the presence of the

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<sup>2</sup> p 20 'The Global House Church Movement' Rad Zdero.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:42-47.

<sup>4</sup> Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Phlm 1-2; Col 4:15.

<sup>5</sup> Rom 12:10, 12:16, 15:14, 16:16; 1 Cor 1:10, 12:25, 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; Gal 5:13; Eph 4:2, 4:32, 5:21; Phil 4:2; Col 3:13, 3:16; 1 Thess 3:12, 4:9,18, 5:25; 2 Thess 1:3; Heb 3:13, 10:24, 13:1; Jas 4:11, 5:16; 1 Pet 1:22, 3:8, 4:7-11, 5:5,14; 1 John 1:7, 3:11,23, 4:7,12; 2 John 1:5.

<sup>6</sup> p.34 'The Global House Church Movement' Rad Zdero.

<sup>7</sup> Especially chapter 5. 'Paul's Idea of Community - The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting. Robert banks. Anzea Publishers Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Gal 6:10.

<sup>9</sup> Eph 2:19.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 14:36.

same Lord in the lives of one another. And so church was built by these living stones being fitted together.<sup>11</sup>

### **How the earliest church carried out mission.**

We often think of evangelism in the earliest church as new Christians ‘gossiping the Gospel’ from householder to householder, slave to slave, merchant to merchant, facilitated by the ‘Pax Romana’ and the great Roman roads aiding travel. However, whilst all that is true, Roger W. Gehring in his seminal work ‘Home Church and Mission’<sup>12</sup> deals extensively with the importance of the *oikos* in the mission of the earliest church.

Gehring recognises that the term ‘mission’ has a broad spectrum of meanings, but he uses it in his book in the sense of ‘the active effort to lead nonbelievers to faith in Jesus Christ’. He then notes three aspects of missional outreach: mission proclamation or preaching; mission through personal conversation; mission through lifestyle (missional outreach through living the Christian life). ‘In this context it is clear that structural differences exist between a mission, on the one hand, in which people are sent out to take the initiative to proclaim the gospel and, on the other hand, the personal magnetism and attraction of a group of people living in the community with one another who more often than not wait for others to come to them and to ask why they are the way they are.’<sup>13</sup>

The first Christians were evangelistically active in and through their houses.<sup>14</sup> The rapid expansion of the church was due to public preaching as well as believers being evangelistically fruitful in their immediate surroundings through personal conversations and through an attractive Christian lifestyle.<sup>15</sup> The close fellowship, (*koinonia*) of the earliest Christians enabled them to get to know one another, to grow close and connect on a deeper level. They were able to go beyond the superficial and cultivate deeper personal relationships, and support one another in a very concrete way, even in material matters.

As well as having an inner impact on the lives of the believers, this form of Christianity had an outward impact into the world around them. Gehring quotes W. Vogler “The way Christians lived in community with one another in spite of their social differences, the fact that they made the needs of one the concern of all...all of this generated a power that flowed out from their community, requiring and producing a response...Moreover, these (house) groups were compellingly attractive, drawing others into their midst.”<sup>16</sup> Again Gehring makes the comment ‘They stand in striking contrast to customary religious life otherwise encountered at the time, and ultimately this is one of the main reasons the first Christians were

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Pet 2:5.

<sup>12</sup> ‘House Church and Mission – The Importance of household Structures in early Christianity’ Roger W. Gehring. (2004 Hendrickson Publishers)

<sup>13</sup> Gehring quoting ‘Mission and Expansion’ – Harnack pp 1-101

<sup>14</sup> Acts 2:46; 3:1-10; 5:42.

<sup>15</sup> pp 1-92 Gehring referring to Acts 4:29b, 31; 2:18.

<sup>16</sup> p 93 Gehring.

so attractive to others around them'. He continues 'They (Home Churches) were a training ground for Christian *koinonia* fellowship inwardly and a showplace of Christian fellowship outwardly. This missional expansion of the gospel was due not so much to the mission-strategic initiatives of the individuals as to the powerful attraction of a Christian community actively practicing *koinonia* fellowship'<sup>17</sup>.

The scope of this paper does not allow me to delve deeply into the use of the *oikos* in Paul's missionary journeys. Suffice to say that Paul saw his mission field as to the whole world, and in particular to the gentiles. It is interesting to note that in the main cities he visited he established bases of operation, using existing *oikos* gatherings that became believers, and developed missional outreach from these support bases. From these support bases outward, the city itself and then the surrounding area were to be reached with the Gospel. It seems likely that Paul initially targeted householders, along with their entire household, for the gospel and to set up a base of operations in their house for local and regional mission.<sup>18</sup> Paul stayed in each city long enough for a church to become self-reliant. They were then left to take responsibility to develop their own life and witness to further the work of the Great Commission.

In summary, I quote Wolfgang Simson in his racy excellent book 'Houses that Change the World' – 'The New Testament Church was a growing church, says Dr Alan Kreider, and from history we know that it kept growing for quite some time. According to an epistle to Diognetus written in the late second century, 'Christians, day by day increase more and more.' In the middle of the third century Origen exclaimed: 'Multitudes of people are coming to faith.' Ramsay MacMullen, professor of ancient history at Yale, has estimated that in each generation some 500,000 people were added to the church up until the conversion of Emperor Constantine in AD 312, when the church finally made up between 5 and 8 per cent of the population of the Roman empire.'<sup>19</sup>

From earliest times until the Reformation there have been numerous reform and renewal movements, many with a 'Home Church' flavour. The Donatists, Peter Waldo and the Waldensians, Francis of Assisi and the Little brothers, Anabaptist movements, the Quakers, Church of the Brethren, John Wesley and the Methodist Movement, and the Base Ecclesial Communities in countries in South America, to mention some. Many are saying that today we are seeing a new 'reformation. The 16<sup>th</sup> century saw the reformation based on doctrine, but are we not seeing the reformation of 'church' in our day?

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<sup>17</sup> p 94 Gehring.

<sup>18</sup> pp 179-80 Gehring. And the whole of Ch 4 for a full treatment of the subject.

<sup>19</sup> 'Houses That Change the World. The Return of the House Churches' Wolfgang Simson. OM Publishing. Paternoster Publishing.

What, then, can we glean to be helpful from the experience of the earliest Christians, if not already recognisable in what we see happening across the world today?

A thread through these movements is the earliest church emphasis that church is not buildings or programs. Church is people, and relationships must go deep so that Christians are discipled to grow, and for the world see the evidence of the Gospel in the quality of Christian living and not just the words that are preached. For this to happen, church gatherings need to be small.

Many of these groups would take the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and the 'one another' verses from the New Testament, as their guide for being discipled to Jesus and to one another.

Another factor for many was the awareness that the church must always be in a prophetic position towards the world. In order to do this, some have had to move aside from church systems that sat comfortably with the status quo or in some cases, became state/church. The earliest church certainly had a prophetic role until it became absorbed in Imperial Rome. Some emerging Home Churches are faced with just the same issues in some countries today.

Perhaps one of the stark similarities is the fact that all Christians in Home Church type gatherings are enabled and encouraged to take an active part in the life and witness of the church. There are no observers or pew sitters in Home Church! The gifts of the Spirit are released to build the church and to witness for the growth of the Kingdom.

Interesting features such as mobility, the release of resources for mission, the fast multiplication that can happen with ease in the planting of simple churches, the cultural relevance of any given Home Church in their context, the cross generational and cross cultural aspect of Home Churches, would all make Aquilla and Priscilla feel 'at home'.

Probably undergirding the reality of the emerging church is that the Lord said He would build His church and we are seeing the fresh initiatives of the Holy Spirit in new ways of church in our day.

### **The Global context**

Firstly, while we see mega churches resourcing the church in many places in the western world, huge networks of Home Churches are emerging especially in the Third World countries, changing the focus to 'small is beautiful' as they impact nations. In the west also, new ways of church are increasing both within the traditional churches as well as independently of them.

We return again to Rad Zdero's recently published book 'The Global House Church Movement' Chapter 4 where he gives interesting statistics of Home

Churches in several countries. He writes ‘...there is a massive influx into the Body of Christ through house churches. In fact, it has been suggested that there are more Christians involved in house churches around the world today than in any other kind of church.’

The house church movement in China is huge and continued to grow under regimes that have brought persecution to the Christians who have stood apart from the restrictive ‘Three Self Patriotic Movement’ registration of churches. Many of these Christians formed what was ‘underground’ church as house churches. ‘Today, Chinese house church leaders have made a commitment that, even if complete political freedom were to arrive tomorrow there would be certain aspects of church structure and function they would keep intact. Specifically, contemporary leaders have decided to: (a) encourage leaders to be mobile evangelisers and house church planters; (b) model teamwork; (c) *not* build any church buildings; (d) continue to have a mobile ‘tabernacle’ mentality rather than a stationary ‘temple’ mindset’ and (e) only provide financial support to traveling apostolic workers while local leaders remain volunteers.....China has for decades now been the prime modern day example of how the simplicity of house churches provides the ideal vehicle for church growth even under adverse circumstances.”<sup>20</sup>

Currently, huge movements of house churches are emerging across large areas of India, especially in the Madhya Pradesh state. Ethiopia, Cuba, Brazil are seeing unprecedented church growth through house churches. But also large networks of autonomous Home Churches are being identified in European countries such as Switzerland, Belgium and France. The U.S. and Canada are seeing amazing growth in Home Churches in the last two years and now we are hearing of the Home Church movement in New Zealand and the steep increase in the numbers of Christians moving into this way of being church. Organizations such as Campus Crusade for Christ, Navigators and the Dove Christian Fellowship are all working in Home Church mode in their outreach activities.

Home Church is the most effective tool in evangelism across the world again in our day as it was in the earliest church.

### **Reinventing ‘church’ in today’s Aussie culture**

There are many reasons why the Australian church is being pushed to change. The number of Christians attending traditional churches is in steep decline. The National Church Life Survey<sup>21</sup> lists four main categories of people who don’t attend a church. The first category can be described as involving people having some kind of problem with the church or its people. This includes aspects such as the beliefs and morals of the churches, seeing worship services as boring or unfulfilling, bad experiences of church people and the way that churches are

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<sup>20</sup> p 70-71 Rad Zdero.

<sup>21</sup> ‘ Why People Don’t Go to Church’ John Bellamy, Alan Black, Keith Castle, Philip Hughes, Peter Kaldor. NCLS Research published by Openbook.

organised. A second category has to do with a lack of motivation. Thirdly, a lack of time and fourthly, lack of access.

For some Christians, there is a conviction that church must happen another way. Some feel their giftedness is unrecognized or stifled. Others leave churches because they feel there 'must be something more', while there are those who have left due to abuse or because of hurtful situations to do with church politics. Barrett of the World Christian Encyclopedia says that the largest group of Christians is those who do not attend church – 'Out of church Christians' he calls them.

Our present situation in Australia sees a generation (or is it two?) that have had little or nothing to do with Christianity let alone the church, and yet a real spiritual hunger is evidenced by the proliferation of New Age and non Christian philosophies. People are not necessarily anti God or anti spirituality. Many are definitely anti 'the church' such as they view it and such as it has often been projected and has often projected itself.

The breakdown of family life, the large number of children growing up without an effective male role model, the ravages of drugs and depression are creating sub-cultures in our society that desperately need the good news of Jesus Christ. It is in these sub-cultures that we are seeing missional Home Church type groups emerging.

Church will and must change. God cannot be locked up in our buildings, programs, rites and theologies when there's a hurting world out there crying out for a touch from the living God. In a sense we have to 'get real' and let go of baggage that stops us from relating to the world. In fact, the 'back to the future' church will be 'out there' rather than running programs of 'indrag' in the guise of 'outreach'. We must accept that the gap between the church and the mission field is huge and people are not going to rush into our buildings and sit in our pews and subject themselves to language and culture that to them might as well belong to another planet. We have to be in the world though not of it as Jesus said. As George Barna has succinctly put it 'Christians have a responsibility to respond intelligently to the world around them. We must respond to the changes in values, beliefs, life-styles and opportunities'. We must be 'Changed by Christ Himself to be agents to change the world rather than agents changed by the world.'<sup>22</sup>

How can church be truly missional in our large cities? In what ways can the diminished congregations in country areas be reinvented and resourced? How can we respond to the cry for community in a fractured society? The trend in Australian society is toward a significant increase in the number of 'one person' households. How then do we connect with the lonely?

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<sup>22</sup> 'The Frog in the Kettle' George Barna (Regal Books)

Groupings in Australian society vary greatly from the 'oikos' of the New Testament church. While we see multiculturalism and multi faith scenarios in our society as being somewhat similar to the setting of the earliest church, yet there are realities and pressures that provide today's church with fresh challenges. Yet we are driven for all that, to some of the ideals of the earliest church in order to get back to simplicity, reality and relevancy.

Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost propose three overarching principles that give missional church energy and direction.

1. The missional church is *incarnational*, not attractional, in its ecclesiology. By incarnational we mean it does not create sanctified spaces into which unbelievers must come to encounter the gospel. Rather, the missional church disassembles itself and seeps into the cracks and crevices of a society in order to be Christ to those who don't yet know him.
2. The missional church is *messianic*, not dualistic, in its spirituality. That is, it adopts the worldview of Jesus the Messiah, rather than that of the Graeco-Roman Empire. Instead of seeing the world as divided between the sacred (religious) and profane (nonreligious), like Christ it sees the world and God's place in it as more holistic and integrated.
3. The missional church adopts an *apostolic*, rather than a hierarchical, mode of leadership. By apostolic we mean a mode of leadership that recognises the fivefold model detailed by Paul in Ephesians 6. It abandons the triangular hierarchies of the traditional church and embraces a biblical, flat-leadership community that unleashes the gifts of evangelism, apostleship, and prophecy, as well as the currently popular pastoral and teaching gifts.<sup>23</sup>

### **A few samples of the fresh initiatives of 'church' in Australia today**

**Carisbrooke Station**, near Winton in western Queensland, is 78 square miles of amazing outback country. The owners, Charlie and Anne Phillott, host a 'Home Church' of Christians from the surrounding Stations. Issues to do with the land, laws, livestock and livelihood are shared in the context of prayer, the Word and loving relationships.

**Quirindi Christian Fellowship** is a group of Christians who have moved aside from the traditional church in a NSW country town, to meet regularly in the homes of the members. As well as their Sunday gatherings, they act as a bridge amongst the churches in the area holding Monday night open meetings to which Christians from the local churches regularly attend. Members are very involved with other Christian work through Kairos and Prison Fellowship as well as regular involvement with mission work in India. I could mention many more groups such as this throughout Australia.

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<sup>23</sup> 'The Shaping of Things to Come' Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. (Hendrickson Publishers)

**Gathering of Christians at the Inns of Court in Brisbane.** This is a weekly gathering of those in the legal profession who study the Bible together, pray and support one another in their private and professional lives. The legal firm **Khor and Burr in Market Street Melbourne** pack their boardroom every Wednesday lunch hour from the neighbouring offices for a Christian gathering including worship and speakers. Many factories, corporate businesses and offices have regular Christian gatherings. It is interesting that a significant number see these gatherings as 'church' as they do not attend a traditional church on a Sunday. A huge number of such groups are springing up in the CBDs of our big cities across the nation. Billy Graham has said that the next great move of evangelistic outreach in the west will be in the marketplace.

**Circle Church Network, Wesleyan Methodist Church** meet in homes in various suburbs in the outer west of Melbourne as well as the CBD. Rev Dr David Wilson, former Principal of Kingsley College and now Director of Urban Encounter and a Melbourne City Councilor is the founder and facilitator of these groups. Denominational churches are working with Home Churches in new area ministry in some parts of our land. Baptists in Adelaide and Canberra and the Uniting Church in Queensland in some areas for instance.

**Urban Neighbours of Hope.** 2001 UNOH was commissioned as 'a missional order among the poor' by the Churches of Christ. Since 1993 they have served in Springvale among Pacific Islanders, East Timorese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Burmese, indigenous Australians and communities of people with mental illnesses. Much of their work is in Home Church gatherings.

**Indigenous Ministry Links Australia** – a non denominational mission team working in Aboriginal Communities in Cape York and Arnhem Land. They gather church in the parks, by the rivers and in the homes of the indigenous people.

Many more could of course be mentioned, but this is a cross section of the different ways church is emerging. These marvels of the Holy Spirit's initiative in building church in our nation, are part of the stream of what God is doing with His church right across the globe.

We indeed live in the most exciting times of church history!

I end with a quote from Hans Kung that the Forge organization often uses -  
*A church which pitches its tents without constantly looking out for new horizons, which does not continually strike camp, is being untrue to its calling...(we must) play down our longing for certainty, accept what is risky, live by improvisation and experiment.* – Hans Kung

Bessie Pereira - Director of OIKOS Australia - Encouraging Home Churches (in its 15th year)

[www.oikos.org.au](http://www.oikos.org.au)