

CASE STUDY (AUSTRALIA): CREATING NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR HOUSE CHURCHES

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Bessie Pereira, Th.L., was ordained in the Anglican Church in Australia and ministered in 5 parishes before stepping aside to be involved with the house church movement in 1989. Since commencing a newsletter for house churches, she has seen this work grow to become a significant resource and means of networking for the movement in Australia. Currently, she is director of this team ministry that has become 'OIKOS Australia' (www.oikos.org.au)

INTRODUCTION

The forerunners of the modern house church movement in Australia were those groups in Canberra that had started in the 1960's with Robert Banks and Geoffrey Moon. These two young Anglican clergymen and Cambridge graduates questioned the hierarchical and paternalistic church structures that led to the disempowerment of ordinary people. They saw simple, small, egalitarian gatherings of church as closer to the biblical norm. In recent years, however, interest has grown significantly. As such, the purpose of "OIKOS Australia" is to serve the house church movement in our nation. Originally a newsletter, OIKOS has evolved to become more than just that. It has become a resource and a means of networking that grows more personal as relationships have developed. As the house church movement has gained momentum, the ministry has expanded. A major part of the work of OIKOS has been to connect groups and individuals with each other whenever possible. Bringing groups together for celebrations, seminars, and sharing days in various parts of the country is a significant part of our work. Isolated groups have been given opportunities to meet with others in their region. The aim of this article is to give an overview of the practical and tangible ways this has been pursued.

THE ORIGINS OF "OIKOS"

Years ago in 1989, a typical scene emerged in a backyard in Melbourne, Australia. About 30 adults and what seemed like double the number of children shared a barbeque meal. The men hovered around the focus of this culinary event, while the women chatted in small groups and the children kicked a football around. Eventually, we all wandered inside to sit around the lounge room for the main purpose of the gathering. Very few had met before, but all had come together on that warm summer evening to find out about house churches in our large city.

As we organized the children in another room to view a video, we settled, uncertain as to what we would learn, and less certain as to what we could share. We decided to go around the room and encouraged each person to simply tell their story—what their church background was, why they changed, where God had them then, and how they viewed their situation. The atmosphere in the room relaxed as the stories unfolded. By the end of the night, everyone was excited: "Before tonight, we thought we were the only ones meeting as church in a home." "We didn't know whether or not our being church like this was valid." "We are so excited that there are others around who believe the way we do about being church in small groups." "How can we stay in touch to encourage one another?"

That group did not actually come together again in the same way, but after a while I knew something had to happen as a follow up to that significant gathering. I had kept in touch with most of the folks and sought to be encouraging and enthusiastic with each one. One day, while sitting at an old computer I barely knew how to use, I started a one-page newsletter. I called it "OIKOS", the Greek word used in the Bible meaning "household", such as we find in Romans 16:3-5. I had no particular vision, but just a

simple desire to help those in that group to keep the bigger picture before them, and to gain inspiration and ideas from one another. So, from time to time, this little newsletter went out to those few folks and gradually to others who somehow heard about it and desired to be included.

THE VISION OF “OIKOS” EXPANDS

In 1993, the Canberra Home Churches hosted the first National Home Church Conference. Large numbers of people came from all over Australia. As in that small Melbourne gathering a few years earlier, hearing and seeing something of the bigger picture encouraged people.

After this conference, the OIKOS newsletter started to go out to a wider group of people around the nation. The newsletter became a means of contact with house church people. Some began to donate towards the cost of publishing what had become a larger quarterly newsletter. It was, and indeed has remained, a simple photocopied publication, rather “homespun” in appearance and very deliberately a newsletter and not a magazine. People found it encouraging and helpful in keeping them in touch with what God was doing with other groups around the nation, as well as providing some overseas house church news. Articles were kept short. Photos and cartoons were included and readers’ requests regarding style and size were noted and incorporated where possible and helpful. Contributions for content have always been encouraged, including those from children.

A major turning point for this work came as the result of a phone call from the Dr. David Wilson, principal of a major theological college in Melbourne. He said that this newsletter was an important instrument in keeping house churches informed and connected. He encouraged me to have others around me for prayer and accountability and indicated his willingness to be a part of that. From that time, OIKOS has been a team ministry. As the house church movement has grown, so too has the more “hands on” involvement of the OIKOS team. Regional teams are now forming around the country.

THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

The Personal Touch

Right from the start of OIKOS, we have been available as a means of friendship towards house churches within the denominational churches, as well as independent groups. From the beginning, we have been careful never to tell groups what to do or to be. OIKOS has always sought to maintain the house church ethos in all we do. The sensitive use of developing technology allows for wide contact, but we also endeavour to maintain more personal ways of developing friendships around the country. While on the one hand, the use of email and the Internet provide the means for wide distribution of information, much of the work of OIKOS has focused on personal visitation of house churches and individual people who are seeking new ways of being church. We use old-fashioned letter writing and the telephone. It would be easy to lapse into impersonal ways by using only impersonal means of electronic communication. We have sought to guard against that happening as far as possible.

Cyberspace

The growth in technology in communications, including the Internet and email and mobile phones, is in place for such a time as this and for God’s kingdom purposes. This can be used to the maximum benefit in networking house churches. OIKOS has been able to catch this wave to bring encouragement to house churches on cattle stations, in isolated townships, to busy marketplace church plants, and to Christians who, for all sorts of reasons, are feeling isolated.

Being able to produce better quality print media, including photos, and to send so much via email and the use of PDF’s, has allowed communication to be more effective, efficient, and financially viable for greater numbers of people. Email has been the most common tool used for communicating with house church folks and for those inquiring about home church.

Talk technology, such as Voiceroom, via the Internet allows another level of communication. OIKOS team meetings bring interstate members together via the Internet monthly, as well as at other times for prayer. In the future, OIKOS is hoping to run “live” seminars for people in remote areas.

The use of our web page has become a focus of the work of OIKOS. Through this medium, we provide information on events and activities of house churches, articles, resources, and a reading list. Subscribers to the newsletter also have access to a section of the web page. This includes a forum to provide a means of communication between subscribers. The forum is protected by a username and password. The forum is divided into “rooms” indicating a virtual “home” with different activities or interests to be discussed appropriate to each “room”. For instance, the Front Porch allows for discussion of anything to do with welcoming new members. The Dining Room focuses on anything to do with the shared meal or communion. The Family Room deals with cross-generational ways of being church and anything to do with children and teens in house church. And so through the other “rooms”, various discussions can be streamed.

FACE-TO-FACE NETWORKING IS STILL VITAL

Regional Gatherings

While all this technology is exciting and is enabling so much communication, none of it can replace the value of face-to-face contact. OIKOS places a major emphasis on visiting house churches around the nation. Many kilometers are travelled to reach tiny gatherings of church to bring news of what God is doing in reforming His church in small groups just like theirs. Across our own nation, God is doing amazing things as more and more house churches are birthed. Groups are encouraged to hear such news. Descriptions of groups, ideas, resources, concerns, and questions are shared. Decentralization of much of the work of OIKOS is currently underway with the development of regional teams. This is enabling more personal contact and realistic assistance given to groups and inquirers. Seminars and celebrations seem to work best if these are held regionally at this time. For the last 2 years, informal gatherings of house church people over the Easter holiday period have been very effective in developing personal relationships and a deeper sense of connectedness amongst house churches in country areas.

National Conferences

During the 1990’s, national house church conferences were organized bi-annually by Canberra and Sydney house churches. These were a massive challenge to organize for small numbers of house churches, and while they were encouraging and inspirational, the logistics have given way to pragmatism, and smaller regional gatherings have become the norm. However, national gatherings will take place in the future. Because many folks in house church only experience the “small” of church, they are inspired by seeing, learning, and experiencing the bigger picture.

International Connections

With increasing numbers of house churches, the OIKOS team and some house churches encouraged and supported me to attend the National Home Church Conference in Denver (Colorado, USA) in 2005. House2House, a networking ministry based in Austin (Texas, USA) with Tony and Felicity Dale, hosted this gathering. This was a great opportunity not only for me to meet many people who are significantly involved in house church movements around the world, but also for the Australian house churches to experience a sense of connectedness with the worldwide movement. We knew that this move of God across Australia is truly in line with what God is doing across the world reforming His Church, but to personally experience it added a deeper dimension.

While speaking with Tony Dale at that conference, I learnt that he and Felicity were to visit Australia in 2006 to be involved in a medical conference. Tony offered to be available to speak with house churches. This was a wonderful opportunity for house churches to meet with them and to gain first hand something of the magnitude of what God is doing across the world. Local teams worked hard and efficiently to bring about these gatherings in 4 of our major cities. This was a wonderful impetus for the house church movement here. Advertising went out widely using all possible media. Many house churches came out from the fringes. In fact, we discovered whole networks we did not know existed. Many people came to the gatherings because they were hungry to find out alternative ways of being church. Others came not realizing the magnitude of what, in fact, they were a part. House churches that

had sat with limited vision for years became ignited with a heart for the harvest outside their group. The feedback from these gatherings indicated a desire to stay in touch and to have follow up activities several times a year in their regions. OIKOS regional teams envisage many more of these gatherings in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

We need to have anointed ears that we may hear what the Lord of the church is saying to us as a nation, anointed eyes that we may perceive the way forward in which He is leading us, and anointed hearts to walk sensitively in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, the builder of the church. The house churches in Australia are aware that we live in the most exciting times of church history—and the best is yet to be. OIKOS is but one instrument of encouragement and connection for house churches across the nation at this time.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What specific tools and methods does OIKOS use to connect house churches nationally?
2. How is OIKOS seeking to remain a grassroots servant of the church, rather than becoming an organization that seeks to control?
3. What lessons can you apply to your city, region, or nation to link house churches together?