

# Take A Tour Of The New Testament Church

*We invite you to take a tour of the New Testament church and discover the core values behind OIKOS and 'House Church' through these four short articles written by the Director of OIKOS, Bessie Pereira.*

OIKOS and that word 'Church'!

How the Earliest Christians thought of themselves as 'church'

Features of the Early Church

It's 'back to the future' for church!

## OIKOS and that word 'CHURCH'!

'Church' is loaded with so many connotations. We wish we didn't have to use it! One easily thinks of buildings with pointy roofs, stained glass windows, pews, pulpits, priests and pastors. People think of it as 'where you go' and 'what you do'. This is a far cry from the view the earliest Christians had of themselves.

Church (ekklesia in the Greek) means 'gathering' and historically refers to any gathering in any context, secular or otherwise. The word implies people not buildings or programs. All of God's people are the church. I am the church. You are the Church. We are the church together. 'Church' is people. That is the view the earliest Christians had of themselves.

The church is Christ in corporate expression.

The only way that this can become a reality is if every member of the assembly supplies that aspect of Christ that he or she has received. When every member of the Body functions according to their particular gift, Christ is fully seen – He, as it were, is assembled in our midst! (see Frank Viola – 'Rethinking the Wineskins' for expansion of this concept.).

In the Bible we see 'church' mentioned in the following ways –

A. The church universal - in heaven and on earth, and down through the ages.

B. The church of the city – such as in Antioch of Pisidia, Antioch of Syria, Caesarea, Cenchrea, Corinth, Ephesus, Jerusalem, Laodicea, Pergamos, Philadelphia, Sardis, Smyrna, Thessalonica, Thyatira.

C. The local church – which until the fourth century, met in small gatherings in homes.

It is generally agreed amongst New Testament scholars, that the basic unit of the church in the first three centuries was the 'household' or 'oikos' (Gr). OIKOS refers to the 'household' rather than just the building. Households in New Testament times included wider family, slaves, servants, clients and in fact one's 'sphere of influence'. In Romans 16:3-5 and in several other places in the New Testament, reference is made to the church that meets in a home.

Why did things change so radically in the 4th century? The Emperor Constantine became a Christian, and here we see the first marriage between church and state and the subsequent corruption of the

former. Purpose built buildings or basilicas were constructed in the accustomed imperial fashion. Leadership became more hierarchical and gatherings became larger. This has continued down to our own times. But winds of change are blowing strongly across the world and in our own land.

GOD IS REFORMING HIS CHURCH IN THESE DAYS, IN WAYS THE EARLIEST CHRISTIANS WOULD RECOGNISE. In fact some are saying that we are seeing a second Reformation. The first had to do with doctrine, this one is 'the church'. It's 'Back to the Future' for the church!

*For background to this article I have used: "Rethinking the Wineskin – The Practice of the New Testament Church" ([Present Testimony Ministry, http://www.ptmin.org/rethink.htm](http://www.ptmin.org/rethink.htm))*

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## **How the Earliest Christians Thought of Themselves as 'Church'**

Disciples – Gathered around Jesus. Walking and talking with Him and one another. Mark 3:14. Matt 18:20

The Body of Christ. Rom 7:14, 1 Cor 12. Jesus is the Head of the church and His follows make up His Body. All the body parts must recognise their gifting and be fully functional for the glory of 'the Head, Jesus'.

The Family. Familial terminology is used throughout the New Testament. Little children. God's household. Brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers.

Ecclesia – gathering. The term was never used in relation to a building, rites, rituals or paid professional leadership. Rather, it was used as describing the universal church in Heaven and on earth and down through the ages, the Christians in a city, and the Christians in local gatherings which were in the homes of the people.

The Bride of Christ. Eph 5:22-32. The beautiful picture of the relationship between Christ and His Church. Love and submission.

A spiritual temple. 1 Peter 2:5. Living stones fitted together to form a spiritual house for God's good pleasure. A Holy priesthood of all believers. The Jewish temple system was at an end. Unrestricted spiritual worship was now the reality.

Vine and Branches. John 15. Teacher and pupil. A chosen race. A holy nation. A people for God's inheritance. Shepherd and flock. These are all relational word pictures used of and by the earliest Christians.

The focus shifted from the Temple of the Old Testament to that of the Kingdom.

Christians in relationship with Jesus as the Head saw themselves as –

His Body in the world, but not of the world.

A prophetic counter culture.

Salt and light.

Disciplined to Jesus and building one another for the Kingdom's purposes which were a present reality as well as a hope for fulfilment into the future.

Knowing the reality of 'Christ in me, the hope of glory' It is no longer we who are living, but Christ who lives in us (Gal 2:20). The experience of the Risen Lord was an ever-present vibrant reality within the individual and amongst them as they encouraged, blessed, taught and enabled one another, and as they joyously spread the good news of the Gospel from household to household.

"And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" Acts 2:47

This is the sort of church the Lord of the Church is building in our day. Those who say the church is dead are looking in the wrong places. We live in the most exciting time of church history.

*I have used 'The Global House Church Movement' by Rad Zdero (William Carey Library) as background to this article and thoroughly recommend the book.*

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## **Features of the Early Church**

House to House

The house was, as today, the place where the basic unit of society lives – the family.

Jesus was reared in a home in a family.

Jesus's ministry was often in homes. Note the many times re read of Jesus eating with His disciples and with others – in homes.

Disciples were sent out on a door-to-door mission.

After Pentecost, Christians met in houses. They shared their common life. They shared meals together. They prayed together and strengthened one another for work and mission. They shared their goods. They were learning and teaching the teaching of the apostles.

Peter visited Cornelius – at his home. Family and friends were converted and were baptised there.

Paul knew where to find the Christians – he went from house to house.

Work and ministry in homes was part of Paul's mission journeys.

### **What were these First Century Home Churches like?**

Participatory. 1 Cor 14:26. It was anticipated that all who gathered would have something to offer for the building up of the church gathered. There was interaction – Eph 5:19-20 Col 3:16. We think of the many 'one anothers' mentioned in the Bible. Serve one another. Love one another. Bear one another's burdens. And so on. There was praise, prayer and singing.

The Apostles' teaching. But not 'jug into mug'. The earliest church didn't have Bibles – not even Old Testaments, lying around the house! They built one another from the teaching they received from the apostles, and the experience of the ways of God in each person were shared. Very grassroots and alive. Teaching and admonishing one another. Prophecy, tongues and other gifts.

The Breaking of Bread and Baptism.

Sharing life on a daily basis.

Evangelism. Hospitality that drew non-Christians and enabled them to enter the fold of believers. Sharing of wealth. There should be no poor among you. Local and missional needs were met. The old way of tithing gave way to hilarious generosity and hospitality.

Day of meeting. Many made a special feature of the day of Resurrection possibly to create a distinctive over against the Sabbath law of the Temple. Paul taught that observance of special days belonged to the law. It seems that the earliest Christians met all sorts of days and times and often daily.

The size of houses dictated the size of the groups but they were inevitably small enough for relationships to go deep.

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## **It's 'Back to the Future' for the Church!**

Gatherings of church are happening in ways the earliest Christians would recognise—right across the globe. Church was always meant to be 'organism' not organisation.

'Home Church' is in really a generic term. It is the way of being church that is important, not the venue. In fact many 'Home Churches' meet in office buildings, flats, by rivers and even in car parks.

Some distinctives about 'Home Church'

We think 'small is beautiful'. Lounge-room sized groups that are everything church is in terms of its life and mission.

Grassroots. What happens arises from the experience of God that each member has. Growth happens as the encouraging and enabling one to another takes us further on the journey as individuals and as a group.

We think 'round' not 'pyramid' as far as structure is concerned. Leadership, as with all the ministry gifts, is recognised as anointed, not appointed! We enable and encourage the gifts of one another for the building of the Body.

Home Church is relationships. Relationship with God and with one another. Where we meet and what we do is not the priority. Who we are together as the People of God is.

Home Church is cross-generational and cross cultural. We encourage children and young adults to fully participate in every aspect of the church's life and mission. There is no junior Holy Spirit! Children are moving in the spiritual gifts including that of prophecy and taking their place alongside adults in the work and mission of the church. Young adults in Home Church are not tagged as 'teenagers' which is a worldly cultural image with negative connotations. They have older role models amongst young marrieds, and take responsibility being role models for those younger. The singles and widows find family. Marriages find support. Wealth is shared and bills are paid.

The Sunday/Monday divide is diminished. In fact a lot of gatherings don't necessarily meet on a Sunday anyway! The work, mission and day to day ups and downs of life are brought into the

gathering and each person is strengthened to go out to work and witness in the unique mission field in which each person is involved.

There is no back pew! Relationships go deep and so conflicts can arise. Groups decide to hang in there together and work through the issues. Conflict can promote growth. Pretending all is well when it isn't does not allow for the trust and enabling that we are meant to bring one another in order to grow for the Kingdom's purposes. There are no secrets in Home Church. We learn to love one another warts and all!

In fact 'being church' like this frees us to be rather than to do. Gatherings like this would be easily recognisable to the earliest Christians – and they are happening all over the world today. The fastest growing movements of church in our day are in the places where people live and work rather than purpose built buildings that inevitably limit the scope of evangelism. It is a fact that there are more Christians meeting like this than are sitting in traditional forms of 'church' in the world today.

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