

**SIMPLE / HOUSE CHURCH
R E V O L U T I O N**



ROGER THOMAN

Simple / House Church Revolution
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For Information:
Appleseed Publications
info@appleseedpublications.com

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INTRODUCTION: MY STORY

“Roger, you can’t go on. You must unplug from ministry and church for an extended period of time. You have no choice!”

I had never been so shocked or devastated as when I heard these words from Dale, a trusted friend who counsels pastors in the throes of clinical burnout. I was completely unprepared to accept his professional opinion even though, deep in my heart, I knew I was experiencing an emotional emptiness unlike anything I had previously known.

“How long do you mean?” I asked.

“At the minimum, six months,” he told me matter-of-factly. “But most probably, you need twelve to eighteen months to get back on your feet.”

I can’t begin to express the level of unbelief and anguish I experienced as he said this.

I was the founding pastor of a ten-year-old church that had been blessed with traditional success markers: consistent growth in numbers, new buildings, a well-developed and funded staff, and a vision for an even bigger future. We were on our way! Except for one thing: Something had happened to the lead pastor. I was literally unable to continue doing what I had been doing for years—leading and guiding our church forward toward that traditional definition of “success.”

As I walked through the agony of telling my Board what was happening to me, they were as surprised as I was. They already knew that I was undone in some way, but they were unfamiliar with the level of depression and burnout I was experiencing. After all, I had always been the epitome of strength, even during difficult times, vulnerable yet durable. They offered me a generous, long-term sabbatical. They cried for me and with me. They were as supportive as any group of people could be. Yet I

could barely rally myself to get up in the morning, let alone continue to guide this church family.

Perhaps even more difficult was the deep sense I felt that I would never return to ministry the way I had known it. Perhaps I would never even return to this church that I loved so dearly. As it turned out, I was correct on both counts. But rather than cast me aside, God was about to use this dark time in my life as an awakening of sorts, a paradigm shift that would completely redefine my understanding of both “church” and “ministry.”

What Went Wrong?

I began to reflect on how ministry had turned out so differently from my expectations of years ago. I remembered reading the accounts of Jesus’ followers in the Gospels and in the Book of Acts when I was a new Christian at the age of 19. It was exciting to see Jesus calling His disciples to walk with Him while He ministered, healed, delivered, and poured love into the lives of countless people. It stirred me to read of the Holy Spirit poured out on new believers and how they were mobilized throughout the world, with God’s power, to bless and touch the lives of others.

Yet, after ten years as a senior pastor, my life and ministry seemed so distant from those New Testament stories:

- I was managing a growing business organization in order to manage the buildings, programs, and staff for what we call a “church” today.
- My weekly pulpit “performance” had become a key to the success of the church, thus the responsibility seemed enormous.
- I was carrying a large amount of responsibility, along with other leaders, for a very large number of relatively passive believers.
- I was tired and burned out on religious activities.

I remembered thinking about all of the sermons I preached over the years encouraging church-goers that they are all members of

Christ's Body with spiritual gifts that God intends to use. Yet, while they sat and listened to my sermon on Sunday morning, there were only two people's gifts highlighted during that hour and a half: mine and that of the worship leader!

I Was Not Alone

As I began recovering, I soon learned that many others were struggling with or questioning church as we know it today. I discovered that:

- pastors are burning out and leaving the ministry in large numbers.
- church leaders are becoming hurt or frustrated by their church roles.
- church-goers are becoming disenchanted with church-as-usual.
- our communities, even those which contain mega-churches, are not being transformed for Christ.

Reggie McNeal, church consultant and author, says this about people who are no longer attending church: "A growing number of people are leaving the institutional church for a new reason. They are not leaving because they have lost faith. They are leaving the church to preserve their faith."

Simple/House/Organic Churches

This book is about what I have learned on the journey out of traditional church forms into the freedom of organic, simple, house churches.

In Chapter One, we will look at the case for simple/house churches and the vision many are seeing of God's glory filling the earth through reproducible gatherings of excited Christians.

In Chapter Two, the definition of "church" will be examined, and we will envision what can happen when the limitations of programmed, institutional Christianity are removed.

In Chapter Three, we will look at how the church can be unleashed by focusing on a going-loving-24/7 way of life rather than on the attendance of meetings or events.

In Chapters Four through Nine, we will look at the actual principles and practices that lead us into impactful Christ-centered living and simple, powerful gatherings.

In Chapter Ten, we discuss the heart of following Jesus: intimacy with God.

Finally, in Chapter Eleven, we will consider several common questions including: “What about money?” and, “What about children?”

Don't Just Read About It

One final comment. This book outlines a way to do life that may be fundamentally different than the way we have learned to walk out our Christian life in the past. This is not something that can be read and then “thought through.” The only way to grasp what God is doing today is to jump in, at whatever level He is leading you to, and swim with today’s currents of the Spirit. My encouragement, above all, is to simply DO whatever He is leading you to do. Go for it! Walking on water only comes to those who get out of the boat.

THE CASE FOR SIMPLE / HOUSE CHURCH

Perhaps today, more than ever, it is vital that we grasp the significance of the simple/house church paradigm. Let's look at why this is so important.

1. Simple / House Churches are Removing Hindrances

Eugene Peterson (translating Ephesians 1) expresses the essence of what the church really is: *"The church is Christ's body in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence."* Yet, as my wife and I travel throughout the world, we see the church so often hindered by organizational forms and structures that are not necessary. By reducing or eliminating these human-made restraints, the church can be unleashed. My wife, Brooks, wrote these words after returning from Africa:

The Revolution is happening – it's happening all over the world. We are in a Reformation. Acknowledge it or not. Be a part of it or not. Jesus longs for his church to come alive, to become a living, breathing, organism. He longs for us to be in a real, live, intimate relationship with Him, regardless of others – and then in real, live relationship with our families – earthly and spiritual. And, He's begging us to come alive, be who we are as individuals, alive and free in Him, telling the world who and what He has done for us...

What I saw in Kenya, I see in America and I see in other parts of the Christianized world. The enemy accepts that Christianity is in the world... but if he can just contain us, keep us from contaminating others, there's little to worry about. If he can contain us in buildings, then the world will not know the truth and few will be set free. But what I saw in Kenya, I also see in America and other parts of the world. The virus is leaking. The Reformation of the 21st Century, led by the Holy Spirit, is taking

Christianity out of containers into the open spaces of the neighborhoods and nations of the world.

2. Simple / House Churches are Biblical

The New Testament does not seem to make a big deal about the forms and structures of church. The focus is much more on Christians going and living the lifestyle of Jesus. Yet, it is easily noted that most church gatherings were simple and natural, meeting mostly in homes:

Please give my greetings to the church that meets in *their home* (Romans 16:5).

The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets *at their house* (1 Corinthians 16:19).

Please give my greetings to our brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church that meets *in her house* (Colossians 4:15).

By meeting in homes, the early church gathered families, households, and other normal social connections together. The Gospel spread quickly through these lines of family and friends and everyday relationships. This methodology was biblical as well as effective for the spread of God's message.

3. Simple / House Churches Empower All Believers

House churches make room for the spiritual gifts of *all* believers to operate on a regular basis.

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church (1 Corinthians 14:26).

By gathering simply and naturally in home-sized groups, everyone becomes a participant and every person's gift is needed.

This trains and equips the whole Body of Christ to become fully alive and fully functioning.

4. Simple / House Churches Foster Authentic Community Life

The desire for authentic relationships where we can open our lives, share our true selves, and be vulnerable safely seems to be a universal hunger. Someone suggested that they had closer relationships at the neighborhood bar *before* becoming a Christian than they experienced in their neighborhood church *after* becoming a Christian.

The shared life that takes place in simple/house churches allows people to find a place of community that is real and honest, where practical living can be discussed and the real struggles of life addressed. As relationships develop it becomes possible to genuinely “encourage one another” and “bear one another’s burdens.”

John Eldredge says, “when Scripture talks about church, it means community... A shared life. They worship together, eat together, pray for one another, go on quests together. They hang out together, in each other’s homes.”

5. Simple / House Churches Free Up Finances

Isaac Cheduke, a church planter in Africa, shared with us his deep grief in closing down a church that had nearly 100 members because they could not afford the rent on the building where they met. As he found the freedom to meet in homes and to network house churches, he is no longer constrained by buildings and finances. He has now developed a network of dozens of house churches that are multiplying, and they have money available to meet needs of people rather than cover the cost of buildings.

This is not just a problem in under-developed countries. It is estimated that it takes over two hundred thousand dollars to launch a church in America. Imagine the money that can be freed up for missions and poverty by simplifying our church structures.

6. Simple / House Churches Can Be Easily Reproduced

Perhaps the most significant case for house churches is that they can be easily started and multiplied. God's clear desire is for the earth to be filled with the "knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea (Habakkuk 2:14)." Rather than build buildings and organizations that require tremendous time, finances, and energy to reproduce, the kingdom of God multiplies organically: one seed produces fruit that produces more seed that produces more fruit. The power of multiplication is far more powerful than we realize. Take a look at any forest and realize how much is accomplished through natural reproductive processes without any human aid at all.

One of the most exciting developments around the world is rapid church planting movements. These take place where disciples are reproduced quickly and simple/house churches are reproduced rapidly. When this happens, entire cities and regions are being impacted with the Good News of Jesus Christ. There are several components that must be present for Church Planting Movements to take place, but one of them is a model of church that is easily reproduced—a simple/house church model.

7. Simple / House Churches Can Ignite Our Generation

Many people, today, are catching the vision of what the church is meant to be as she throws off the hindrances and becomes the Spirit-filled movement of Believers she is destined for.

We are catching the vision for living life, 24/7, with and for God without one moment or place being more holy than another. It is a vision of every believer contributing to one another through the spiritual gifts that reside in each one. It is a vision of every believer, using his/her gifts, to take God's love and power into the world we live in. It is a vision of no longer thinking of the church as an event or place to go, but realizing that we, his people, really *are* the church everywhere and every place that we go.

Wolfgang Simson describes his vision of what the church, unhindered, is becoming:

[I dream of a] church, which does not need huge amounts of money, or rhetoric, control and manipulation, which can do without powerful and charismatic heroes, which is non-religious at heart, which can thrill people to the core, make them lose their tongues out of sheer joy and astonishment, and simply teach us The Way to live. A church which not only has a message, but is the message. Something which spreads like an unstoppable virus, infects whatever it touches, and ultimately covers the earth with the glory and knowledge of God.

DEFINING “CHURCH” (WEBSTER HAS IT WRONG)

Church according to Miriam-Webster’s online dictionary:

- 1: a building for public and especially Christian worship
- 2: the clergy or officialdom of a religious body
- 3: a body or organization of religious believers: as a: the whole body of Christians b: denomination <the Presbyterian church> c: congregation
- 4: a public divine worship <goes to church every Sunday>

Webster defines church according to the way this word is used *today*. I was taught this same definition as a little boy when I would put my hands together and recite the rhyme: “Here is the church, and here is the steeple; open the door and here are all the people.”

Jesus, however, introduced the term “church” with a very different meaning in mind. He used a word “ekklesia” that simply described a group or assembly of people. This is the original definition of the word. He described “church” as those people who were following Him—people walking in allegiance to him. People. His followers. Nothing more than that.

Jesus did not spend much time describing how to organize his people together or how to do meetings. Rather, his focus was on a lifestyle of loving others and obeying Him: “Go into all the world...” “Let your light shine...” “Do what you see the Father doing...” “Love one another...” Church, as defined by Jesus, was simply his followers living life for and with him.

Over the years, however, the word “church” began to include the many structures and forms that we added to the original meaning:

- Public meeting places (buildings or storefronts)
- Organizations of believers who get together to be led by a worship team and preached to by a pastor
- Denominations that we join

But, as John Eldredge reminds us:

Church is not a building. Church is not an event that takes place on Sundays. I know, it's how we've come to think of it. 'I go to First Baptist.' 'We are members of St. Luke's.' 'Is it time to go to church?' Much to our surprise, that is not how the Bible uses the term. Not at all.

No. Not at all. Church is God's people—those who are choosing to live life with Jesus... 24/7. That is it. Nothing more.

But don't God's people gather together? Yes. We do see gatherings take place in Scripture. Many gatherings. Most often informal and simple. Normally in homes (Romans 16:5). Everyone participated (1 Corinthians 14:26). They functioned as spiritual families that cared deeply for one another (Romans 12:10). Yet the focus of the church (God's people) was a lifestyle of Jesus-following, rather than organizing events, attending programs, or joining organizations.

Perhaps the best way to describe the church of the New Testament is as small, vibrant, caring families of believers who are loving others and reproducing themselves into every corner of the world.

The Things I Learned About Church From Bible College

I attended a Bible College as a brand new Christian hungry to live a life useful to God. I loved reading the stories of the disciples following Jesus, traveling with him, ministering with him, doing miracles alongside of Jesus as he poured out his life for others. I thought it was fantastic. I enjoyed studying the book of Acts and seeing God's people going throughout the world, filled by the Spirit, walking in God's purposes and power. But, as a subtext, I

was also taught to "do church" in Bible college. It was not a specific class. There was no text book. I simply learned to follow "how it was done" by those around me. *Frankly, the way I learned to "do church" did not look much at all like the lives of the early disciples that I was studying and wanting to be like.*

Nevertheless, by the time I felt called to pastor a church, I no longer questioned how church was done. We started with a building and a core group of Christians. We invited, and planned, and organized, and put together Sunday events. We built more buildings and started more services to invite people to. We developed programs for young and old, men and women, married and divorced. We hired staff and we organized ministry teams.

Without realizing it, we were following human traditions for church life that were developed over the centuries: cathedrals, pulpit-led services, pews, order-of-service, etc. All of these things may be useful in their place (God can use anything), but they have no place in the basic definition of "church."

Sadly, as the church has adopted more and more traditions and become more and more institutionalized, it has become largely ineffective in its impact on earth. In the western world, where we have created the best organizational church systems that exist, Christianity is declining. In contrast, in parts of India and China where the expression of church is largely organic, simple, and fluid, the church is flourishing.

Our longing is to see the church restored to its essence of life and vitality so that she becomes the full expression of Christ's power and love on earth. This is the great hope of God's kingdom coming to influence, save, and redeem a lost planet. Priscilla Shirer made this comment:

In the first century in Palestine Christianity was a community of believers. Then Christianity moved to Greece and became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome and became an institution. Then it moved to Europe and became a culture. And then it

moved to America and became a business. We need to get back to being a healthy, vibrant community of true followers of Jesus.

Being Church

My Filipino friend, Molong Nacua, wrote an excellent article entitled "Being Church" that reminds us of the true meaning of "church:"

Church is where Christ lives, not the place where we meet. It is Christ-empowered people, a kingdom of priests for the purpose of winning against the works of the devil and establishing God's Kingdom (1 Cor. 3:17; Matt. 18:19; Ex. 19:6)... Christianity is not about doing church, but being the church. Church is not some place to go to participate in, but it is about being who you are in Christ and thus experiencing His real life in you. Your Christianity was never defined by attending a particular church. It is defined by Christ in you. In other words, you are a Christian 24/7, not because you participate in a two-hour worship service, but because Christ lives in you every minute of every day.

UNLEASHING THE “GOING” CHURCH

The church is meant to be the expression of Christ’s life and power on earth. This can only take place as:

- We move out of “comfy Christianity” into the daring adventure of following Jesus.
- We replace our “come-structures” with “go-structures”
- We recapture the “going” lifestyle

Comfy Christianity

Shane Claiborne writes: “Being a Christian is about choosing Jesus and deciding to do something incredibly daring with your life.”

In my former life as a pastor, I was a dispenser of comfortable Christianity. I took on the job of creating a “conducive environment” for worship. What this really meant was making a worship event cushy enough that people would want to come and then come back: comfortable seats, coffee, pleasing worship music, and a sermon that holds attention. Unfortunately, regularly attending a comfortable worship event has become the primary marker of what it means to be a Christian today.

In fact, we often replace the miraculous adventure of following Jesus with religious activity. Did I go to church this week? Check it off the list. Did I read my Bible? Check it. Did I pray? Check it. Done! I have completed my Christian activities and am, therefore, a “good Christian.” Religion itself becomes an easy replacement for a daring life lived in partnership with Jesus.

Ironically, Jesus drew a startling line in the sand in response to someone who wanted to follow him: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head (Matthew 18:20).” Jesus was not a dispenser of comfortable

Christianity. Quite the opposite. He taught that followers would live a lifestyle of stepping outside of comfort zones in order to join him in the adventure of extending the life of the kingdom.

Replacing “Come-Structures” with “Go-Structures”

Part of our comfy Christianity has been to focus most of our Christian activities within the four-walls where our friends and other Christians hang out. The result is that we reach out to others by inviting them to come join us where we are.

My fellow-blogger, Hamo, comments on this:

If Jesus were alive today and his mission was still to seek out and save the lost what might he do?

Would he hire a building, set up a sound system, develop a music team, drama team, and then do local letterbox drops advising people that they could come and be part of his church on Sunday?

Was it ever Jesus’ intention that non-Christians should seek us and desire to attend our worship events? Or didn’t he say quite clearly that it was his calling, and now ours to seek out and save the lost; to go to their world and enculturate the gospel there. Little Bo Peep evangelism (leave ‘em alone and they’ll come home) is fast running out of steam...

Recapturing the “Going” Church

The church’s true nature is best seen by the life that Jesus modeled: he took the life of the kingdom everywhere that he went—out into the world that he was ministering to. In the process of going, he healed, loved, delivered, and shared good news.

God’s heart is missional at the core as he seeks to recover his children who are lost to him. Jesus came to “seek and to save the lost.” This is not a sidebar. God, because of his love, is a caring, reaching God.

The church is becoming unleashed as Christians are re-discovering the daring adventure of “going” and taking the

presence (love, life, and power) of God everywhere that they are going. Jesus called us to a lifestyle that would take us out of our comfort zone and into the adventure of miraculous living as we extend ourselves to extend his kingdom.

As Jim Rutz wrote, “The bleachers are beginning to empty as 707 million action-oriented Christians start to pour out onto the playing field and discover the joy and challenge of every-member ministry.”

But What About the Gathering?

In conferences and conversations all over the world about simple/house church, it seems that people usually want to learn *first* about “how to gather.” This is natural since we have thought about “church” as being mostly about events and gatherings. The problem is that though we can replace larger events and gatherings with smaller ones, our motivation may still be to hang out with our Christian friends and, again, seek to reach others by inviting them to join us.

By focusing first on the gathering, we miss the point that Jesus’ focus was first on the *going* way of life. If gatherings develop that support a dynamic, outward, supernatural lifestyle, then the gatherings will be powerful and relevant. However, if gatherings become a *replacement* for the true adventure of Jesus-following (which can easily happen), then we will again regress into a comfortable Christianity with little life in it.

Stepping Out Makes Life Worth Living

Most of the truly defining moments of our lives take place because we are willing to step out and trust that God has more for us. Rarely do we find new life by holding back or retreating into our familiar, comfort zones. If this entire book accomplishes nothing else, I hope it will inspire someone to listen and follow a very adventurous God into some new horizons.

Pete Greig wrote:

Christ is not a passive Savior sitting in some cosmic comfy chair. Our God is dynamic; He is a creative force, the ultimate visionary, always on the move, and if we want to know Him and be with Him, we will have to follow Him wherever he is going next.

Let's look at some principles that can guide us forward.

A PROCESS OF FIVE PRINCIPLES

REACH ✦ DISCIPLE ✦ GATHER ✦ EMPOWER ✦ MULTIPLY

“Jesus didn’t leave us with a system he left us with his Spirit. He gave us his Spirit as a guide instead of a map.” Wayne Jacobsen

The risk of writing any book on “church” or “Jesus’ way of life” is that we end up looking for formulas and methods rather than allowing God to divinely lead us.

Therefore, I want to stress that the next five chapters are only meant to provide some broad principles—not guidelines, not structures, not formulas, and not methods. The principles can provide some general illumination on the lifestyle Jesus calls us to, but must not be a replacement for listening and following him.

That said, the simple/house church way of life that we see in scripture involves the following five principles:

1. Reach. Reaching out. Loving others with no strings attached. An “outbreak of love.”
2. Disciple. Disciple-making that everyone can do. Influencing others relationally and contagiously.
3. Gather. Experiencing dynamic, participatory body-life with others.
4. Empower. Empowering others. A truly upside down understanding of leading (facilitating) decentralized systems.
5. Multiply. Reproducing yourself. Becoming seed that brings forth a multiplied harvest.

De-Programming These Terms

The most important part of the next five chapters is not just the principles themselves but the need to unlearn our institutional

mindset around these principles and re-connecting with their true, life-giving meaning.

Most of us have learned a programmed approach to reaching, discipling, gathering, leading, and reproducing. The result is that we often end up in a “duty” mode: we are serving God for the wrong reasons, reaching out to others with the wrong motivations, and turning people into projects with the wrong results.

Institutions create programs that lead to projects and feel-good piety but are often not integrated into the fabric of who we are and our God-created abilities to love and bless other people. The result is that others often feel manipulated, and we become uncomfortable with ourselves and the programs we have been taught to implement.

In contrast, as we look at these principles, we want to explore their real meaning in the context of the adventure of following Jesus and truly loving others with no strings attached. We do want to see others influenced, but we trust that this can take place naturally, contagiously, and relationally.

REACHING OUT—AN OUTBREAK OF LOVE

REACH ✦ DISCIPLE ✦ GATHER ✦ EMPOWER ✦ MULTIPLY

The first principle we see for God’s going, missional people is the intention to *reach out to others*. This is not a project nor a program, but a way of life that involves an outbreak of Jesus’ love through us toward others.

As people are learning to walk with Jesus into the world, these types of “love-outbreaks” are happening everywhere:

- A woman visits the jail week after week to love, comfort, care for, cry with, and encourage the female prisoners.
- Several families move into a lower socio-economic neighborhood in order to identify with their needs and problems.
- A mother, whose own supply of rice is limited, regularly shares her food with a widowed neighbor.
- A young couple moves to Mongolia in order to learn the language and live among a tribal people.
- A family takes in several foster children that are in need of a home and caring family.
- A young teacher takes a position in an inner city school in order to love the most un-loveable students.
- Several young students regularly spend time looking for people with needs in the neighborhoods and marketplaces near their campus where they share in practical ways and prayer, expecting miraculous interventions.

Christians are re-discovering that the heart of the Jesus-way-of-life is not church-attendance and a smug attitude toward others, rather it is truly embodying the love of Christ—anywhere and

everywhere—in a world that is desperately in need of this love. It is a type of reaching out that is marked by authentic concern for people.

God Is Passionate About His Purposes

God's commitment to reaching lost people is described dramatically in Luke 15 where Jesus describes the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son. He uses these descriptions of losing something of value to help us connect with God's heart to pursue those who are separated from him. Having lost a child (temporarily at an amusement park—a brief but terrifying experience), I have some sense of the intense focus that takes place while searching for one's own child. Until I found my missing daughter, I had only one thing on my mind and heart: seek and find her!

In the same way, God's heart and focus is consumed with his desire to find the lost. He has created us to join him in his missional passion and, deep inside each of us, is the sense that by joining him we become part of the great, epoch drama of eternity—reclaiming God's own children forever.

We Reach and Love Others In Our Own Way

At the same time, we learn that He made us uniquely in the way that we join him in his mission. Most Christians will need to shake off old thoughts and ideas around institutional outreach in order to discover their own true passions and gifts and how they have been uniquely designed to partner dynamically with God and his purposes.

We have often been taught to think that outreach has to do with canned programs. This is the most misunderstood aspect of the Christian life. God has made each of us so uniquely that no one can follow another's style or way to reach and love others. The real dynamic of the Christian life happens as we connect our special

longings, gifts, abilities, and callings with the passionate purposes of our Creator.

The following are some principles to help in the process of reaching and blessing others.

Pray and Listen

Jesus said he only did what he saw the Father doing (John 5:19). The most important discipline for following Jesus dynamically is learning to listen to his voice. He wants to lead us personally into the adventure of partnering with him, so we want to develop our ability to hear his nudges and leadings.

Know Whom You are Called To

When someone enquired about visiting Mother Teresa to help with her work among the poor of India, she encouraged the person to *find their own Calcutta*. In other words, each of us must discover who it is that God has put on our heart to love and reach out to. This makes it personal and meaningful.

As we listen to God's voice, we will begin to sense that we have a particular heart for a particular group, or several groups, of people. Jesus, in his human experience, was called to the people living in Israel. He knew his focus. In the same way, God has given a focus to each of us, and we will find great joy in our love-life towards others if we accept whom we are called to.

The most obvious focus for us may be those we are already living among: our family (church always begins at home), our extended family, our neighbors, our co-workers, and our friends. At the same time, we may have a particular concern for a nearby people group: homeless, youth, prisoners, children, elderly, etc. It may well be that God has put this group on our heart because we are specifically called to them. Finally, we may know the stirring for a people-group that does not live near us, i.e., the unreached of Africa or the inner city poor.

Knowing who we are called to and being willing to position our lives so that we can readily love those whom God has given us to love will allow us to begin expressing the passions and gifts that we were made for.

Live Among Them

Once we hear God's voice and recognize those whom we are called to, it becomes natural to live among them. Perhaps we already are. But this requires that we give up our "separateness" and join them where they are. One of the greatest forms of love, as exemplified by Jesus, is to fully join with people and be among them. If the people that God has put on our hearts congregate in bars, then so do we. If they congregate in jails, then we obviously have to meet them where they are. If they live in areas of poverty, then we consider how we are meant to identify with them. If they are "people of our community" then we become involved in our community.

This may involve a literal move if we are called to live among a group of people that we are not already near. Or, it may simply mean taking the time to involve ourselves fully with people we are already living among: extended family, neighbors, or co-workers.

For too long, Christians have lived apart—serving and worshiping in club settings behind closed doors. As someone put it, we now have to learn how to live in the smoking sections.

This is neither a method nor a program, rather it is a way of life that is born out of love for those whom God has called us to. He will lead us as our heart for people grips us.

Love Genuinely

Although Jesus said that Christians would be known by their love, this is almost universally not the case today. We are more often known for our self-righteousness and judgmental attitudes. Furthermore, most un-Christians believe we care more about "making converts" than about them as people. I heard an atheist

share that, having made friends with a Christian, he felt the need to ask him, “Am I truly your friend or am I just your project?” This suggests that people may have the perception that Christians tend to look at them as “objects to convert” rather than people that they care deeply about.

Yet, the joy that Jesus has called us to, is to simply love others. That’s it. No strings attached. When we recognize the people that God has called us to (including those we are already living among) then we are free to unleash creative ways to just love others genuinely and generously.

Discover Your Own Gifts and Passions

As we live among those we are called to, listening to God’s voice, loving those we are with, we can begin to uncover our own passions and spiritual gifts. We become more and more dynamic as our unique abilities are unleashed outside of the church walls. Many of us have been trained to use our spiritual gifts *inside* church buildings. How much more powerful to see those same gifts (and more) unleashed as we live a life that is engaging a lost world.

God’s heart is that all will know him. Our joy is to find our unique and created way to join him in that passion.

Reaching out to others and using our own gifts and abilities to love them reflects the very life Jesus lived.

DISCIPLEMAKING IS FOR EVERYONE

REACH ✦ DISCIPLE ✦ GATHER ✦ EMPOWER ✦ MULTIPLY

“The clergy-laity distinction removed personal discipleship from the hands of common Christians (Dennis McCallum).”

The greatest joy of the Christian life is being used by God to bring whole-life, spiritual transformation to another. We have removed much of this joy by not understanding that true “disciple-making” is about *everyday life* and *everyday relationships*—and that it is for *everyone*. By making it a program that is part of our churches or a process that people are specially trained to do, we are holding back Christians from stepping into their true destinies and their greatest sense of purpose. By presenting disciple-making as something we “do” to others, as opposed to something that God does (which we can invite people into), we become performance-oriented and manipulative rather than contagious as we naturally influence others toward their own relationship with God.

Disciple-making flows naturally out of the relationships we are building through reaching and loving people.

Some Basics to Consider

1. *Disciple-making takes place in every relationship we are in.* Because we live our lives in an intimate, personal relationship with Jesus Christ and his purposes, every relationship we are in influences people. This happens with or without our awareness or intentionality. It happens whether or not they are Christians. It happens whether or not there is even any interest on their part. It just happens because of who we are. Therefore, disciple-making is taking place in all of the following relationships:

- The young man, a neighbor, who works at the local grocery store and with whom I exchanged some friendly comments the other day.
- The friend I am meeting with to read a book on prayer. He is interested in deepening his spiritual life although he is not particularly interested in Jesus or the Bible at this point.
- The not-yet Christian who keeps coming to a house church gathering and particularly enjoys the time spent reading and discussing Scripture.
- The Christian whom I have invited into an intentional mentoring relationship because he wants to grow in his relationship with God and in the use of his spiritual gifts and influence.

Disciple-making takes place naturally, all the time, out of spending time with people—eating, sharing, playing, or whatever we do. It is the outflow of reaching and loving those we are called to.

2. Disciple-making becomes intentional, at some point, because of our love for others. Because we, ourselves, are in pursuit of God and his purposes, our love for others will cause us to naturally invite them into a more intentional pursuit alongside of us. They will remain our friends regardless of how they respond. Nevertheless, this intentional invitation is an important way that we demonstrate our concern for others.

3. We can only work where God is working. It is not our job to cause someone else to have an interest in God. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. What we *can* do is recognize when God is at work in someone's life and see the opportunity to love them by purposefully inviting them to join us in a deeper pursuit of God.

4. We do not have to be the expert or know everything to disciple others. When we more intentionally invite people to join us in our pursuit of God, we do not have to have the answers. We want people to

become disciples/followers of Jesus, not of us. Therefore, we point them to the same tools that work for us: prayer (talking to God) and the word of God (which they can learn from even before believing fully in it). We model our use of these two tools and invite them to come alongside of us and learn about God, from God, and through God. Once we fully grasp and can trust in this process, we really do discover that natural disciple-making is easy and for everyone.

The following are some guidelines that will help in the process of discipling.

The Disciple-Making Process

1. *Reach out in love.* Disciple-making starts with the type of reaching out discussed in the last chapter. The moment we are in relationship with and loving others, we are influencing them by our life and lifestyle.

2. *Pray.* We pray for people we care about because we want God's best for them. Other-centered prayer and intercession are as natural as breathing when we are intimate with God and connected to his passion and purposes. They are the catalysts for God's transforming activity to be released into the lives of others.

Jesus' authority (all authority in heaven and in earth) is given to us as we are willing to join him in his mission. We step into that authority by praying for those God has put into our lives and expecting that he will be working.

3. *Invite.* As mentioned, there comes a time in many of our relationships where we are seeing God at work in some way, and we feel compelled to invite them to join us in a more intentional pursuit of God. This can happen in many diverse ways. But the key is that we are willing to risk, at the right time, this critical step. It is a step of love. It is a step about caring for others. It is a step in which we know that we are going to continue to extend ourselves to them in love and friendship regardless of how they respond.

4. *Let God's word work.* Since we are not discipling people to follow us, they can begin using God's word to learn from and follow. My experience is that people do not have to fully accept the Bible as God's word to begin learning from it and accepting its truth. Sometimes we think that people will be put off by the Bible. But this is not my experience. If we are not "preaching" texts at them, but inviting them to look and learn for themselves, I find that there is a general openness to discovering for themselves what the Bible might have for them.

The Bible, indeed, is far more powerful than we realize. It has the power to transform hearts and lives, all by itself, through the energizing of God's Spirit. Often, we just need to invite people to encounter it and let God work.

Ultimately, our goal is to see people become self-feeders. We do not want them dependent on us or other teachers, but on God and his word. Therefore, we like to use self-discovery studies (inductive-type) where people are reading, discovering, and applying truths for themselves (see Appendix A).

5. *Invite them to reach others immediately.* It is possible for someone who is in the early stages of learning to follow Jesus to invite others to do the same with him or her. There is no reason to wait before helping someone see the benefits of reaching and loving others. It is even possible that some who are not yet "converted and baptized" can lead others in an inductive-type study of Scripture and toward a deeper pursuit of God.

Alan Hirsch calls this "action-learning discipleship." He describes it this way:

As soon as they are called he [Jesus] takes the disciples on an adventurous journey of mission, ministry, and learning. Straightaway they are involved in proclaiming the kingdom of God, serving the poor, healing, and casting out demons. It is active and direct disciple making in the context of mission. And all great people movements are the same. Even the newest

convert is engaged in mission from the start; even he or she can become a spiritual hero.

6. *When it is time, baptize publicly.* We have found that baptism is a great opportunity for people to invite their family and friends to hear their story and celebrate in what God has done. When we suggest this to new Christians, they simply accept it and do it. We throw a “baptism party,” celebrate with food, and are excited to have more un-Christians than Christians present.

7. *Build a deeper relationship.* Discipleship continues to be about relationship more than anything else. If the person is becoming more and more self-feeding, then our role is to simply support them as they learn to walk out their life as a Jesus-follower. By vulnerably opening our lives to this person, we create a relationship space where they can be honest with us about all that they are going through and feeling. This will allow us to be more caring and helpful as we walk alongside them.

8. *Teach a little (if you must), but model and empower more.* There can be a place for some teaching of basic Christian principles if you are oriented that way. It is not necessary. God’s word will accomplish this. But if you must teach some basics, that can be beneficial. However, it is important to keep in mind that our goal is to move them into a place of self-responsibility for their spiritual life. Therefore we want to move from teaching them, to modeling *for* them how to learn for themselves, to fully empowering them as disciple-makers of others as quickly as possible.

9. *Keep reproduction in mind.* Everything about our disciple-making process is designed to help others begin the reaching/discipling process themselves as soon as possible. This facilitates natural multiplication and the exponential growth of God’s kingdom as he intends.

Finally, participatory gatherings, the topic of the next chapter, provide an additional tool for the process of discipleship to

SIMPLE / HOUSE CHURCH REVOLUTION

continue and for all to become fully functioning members of Christ's body.

GATHER SIMPLY

REACH ✦ DISCIPLE ✦ **GATHER** ✦ EMPOWER ✦ MULTIPLY

One pastor described his first experience of gathering in a simple, house church setting:

As of midnight Saturday night... I AM FREE! No more institutional church. I am no longer on staff at my church... We want to follow God, relax, and rest in His presence... Sunday morning we slept in--the first Sunday morning "sleep-in" in my adult life... Then at 4:00 p.m. we went to a friend's house for a house church meeting... We played some horseshoes in the backyard before dinner. We enjoyed communion together and ate a meal together. I got my guitar out and played a few songs and then the host popped in a worship CD, passed around some song sheets and we sang a few more worship songs. One lady's dad who lives in Oklahoma had recently been diagnosed with cancer (lymphoma) and she was really upset, so we spent quite some time laying our hands on her and praying for her dad. It was a very moving time... The freedom is almost overwhelming!

This pastor's experience is only one example of a simple, natural gathering. It is not a "model" for house church. That way of thinking is institutional in nature. Instead, we want to allow God to lead us into the myriad of ways that followers of Jesus can gather around simple devotion to him and a love for one another.

What Gatherings Are NOT

Most of us come from backgrounds where gatherings are organized as part of traditional church structures. Most church gatherings (even small groups) are organizationally-driven,

programmed events. It can be a challenge for us to re-imagine gatherings that are unlike our past church experiences.

Let's start by thinking through the New Testament and reminding ourselves that gatherings were *never*:

- An event to attend
- A performance to watch
- A place to go
- A place or event that is exceptionally holy
- A place to go to get spiritually fed (focus on self)
- A service to attend where there is a pastor to sit under
- An event/service that needs finances in order to happen
- A meeting to attend that demonstrates allegiance to a religious organization
- A get-together where one goes to get one's spiritual life "super-charged"
- A service where a few people minister to a crowd of people

What we do see in Scripture are many different types of gatherings which took place frequently, naturally, and often spontaneously. They did not require a great deal of planning or preparation because they were a natural outflow as followers of Jesus connected and gathered around a love for him and each other. They took place in normal, everyday settings and they fit into the rhythm of everyday life.

Characteristics of New Testament Gatherings

Let's reflect on what gatherings *do* look like in Scripture. Remember, the first church was birthed with 3,000 people coming to Christ in one day (Acts 2). Gatherings immediately sprang up in many different settings, at many different times, and with great frequency—even daily (Acts 2:46). The nature of these gatherings was such that they could take place anywhere and everywhere that life was happening.

Most gatherings were small. Although there were city-wide prayer meetings at times, most gatherings took place in homes where it was easy and natural to gather. Jesus himself ministered to crowds but gathered, personally, with his closest spiritual friends (the three), spent a great deal of time building relationships with his extended spiritual family (the twelve), and, to a lesser extent, with his spiritual network (the seventy). Likewise, smaller gatherings were clearly the focal point of New Testament congregating as evidenced by the churches meeting mostly in homes.

Many gatherings took place around a meal. This created a space for relationships to be built and intimacy to take place. The smaller-sized groups, along with eating together, allowed for deeper relationships to be built and honest sharing of life to take place.

Gatherings met where people already naturally congregated. Special buildings for worship, and the associated costs were completely unnecessary as worshipers met together in homes, neighborhoods, and existing public meeting places.

Gatherings were simple and did not require professionals or even special leadership. Although leaders functioned to serve the church in a variety of ways (see chapter eight), gatherings were not dependent on special leaders to take control or guide the meetings. It was understood that when Christ's body came together every member loved one another and ministered to one another under the guidance and leadership of the Holy Spirit.

Gatherings were more fluid than structured. In fact, many gatherings took place completely spontaneously without pre-set schedules at all. Yet even regular gatherings did not have a prescribed "order of service" or a model to follow. The idea of planning and structuring a New Testament gathering was completely contrary to the understanding that Jesus is in the midst

of his body when we gather and that he is fully present and actively manifesting his will and resurrected life.

As Wayne Jacobsen said:

Jesus did not leave us a model to build, but a guide to follow. We experience the life of the church not because we meet in a certain way or in a certain place, but because we learn to listen to God together and let Him teach us how to share His life. If we substitute any method or design for that process, we will end up following it instead of Him and building a counterfeit instead of the real deal.

Every Person a Minister

The reason that simple, Spirit-led gatherings could take place anytime and anywhere was because the early church completely understood the concept of *every-person-ministry*. This goes to the very heart of God's church: every person filled by the Spirit of God, every person part of the priesthood of all believers, and every person essential to the expression of Christ on earth.

Gatherings reflected this reality: "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:26)." *This is not just a suggested model for church gatherings; this is highlighting the reality that Christ can only be most fully expressed through the participation of every person.*

Frank Viola says it well: "The Lord Jesus cannot fully disclose Himself through only one member. He is far too rich. In fact, His riches are inexhaustible (Ephesians 3:8)! When every member of the Body functions in the meeting, Christ is seen. He is assembled in our midst."

Because the early church walked in the reality of every-person-ministry, it was easy for gatherings to take place naturally, organically, and wherever believers could easily gather. They understood these premises:

- When Jesus-followers get together, Jesus is in their midst.
- When Jesus-followers get together, everyone ministers one to another through the spiritual gifts that are given to each one.
- When Jesus-followers get together, the Spirit of God, who is in the midst of the gathering, will lead.

With this understanding, gatherings can take place simply, powerfully, any time, anywhere, with whoever is able to gather.

What About Intentionality?

Doing away with organization and programs does not mean that we necessarily do away with intentionality. Jesus-followers gather. They gather because they want to, and they gather because they need to in order to stay connected to God through his family.

As we walk with Jesus and look at his life, we find that he depended on others and valued the importance of gathering regularly with others.

Types of Gatherings

Three types of gatherings seemed to be the norm in the life of Jesus as well as those who were led by the Holy Spirit in the early church times:

1. Spiritual friends. Gathering with one, two, or three others was highly valued in the New Testament and provides a unique opportunity for high level sharing and inter-relating to take place.
2. Spiritual family. Gathering regularly with an extended-family-sized group (7-20) also seemed to be a New Testament norm providing a community of believers to grow with, exercise spiritual gifts with, and share life with.
3. Spiritual network. There is also benefit in gathering with larger groups for prayer, worship, or receiving input from certain ministries within the body of Christ.

In acknowledging these three types of gatherings, this is not intended to be a model for an organization. It simply points the way for Christians to gather and connect with one another in a healthy, yet organic, way. It provides us with some guidance in seeking out a way to regularly relate with the body of Christ that is balanced and growth-producing.

Followers of Jesus become responsible *themselves* to find these three levels of connectedness. We do not need to provide an organization or program for this to happen. We simply need to encourage one another to live life with Jesus and gather regularly with others as he leads.

What Do We Do When We Gather?

Coming together, for Jesus-followers, is really as easy as, well, coming together. The Bible does not provide us with an outline or order of service because we are his people, coming together with his love and purposes on his heart, for his glory, and with his leading. As such, times together can involve anything and everything from eating to praying, from sharing life's journeys to crying with each other, from studying scripture to listening in silence, from laughing together to ministering in spiritual gifts, from talking and more eating to prophesying and teaching.

When people ask this question, "what do we do when we get together?" I like to encourage them to think through two scriptures, initially, that speak to this question.

The first has already been mentioned: 1 Corinthians 14:26 says "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation."

The second is Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Notice, again, this is not an order of service, simply a broad record of what God's people tend to do when they gather. The four elements of Acts 2:42 provide some guidelines for gatherings, but the Holy Spirit wants to be the one leading and

controlling our agenda. When we get together, it is a supernatural gathering with God in our midst.

As Felicity Dale said, “If we will learn to hear and follow His promptings, we will never have a boring meeting.”

Because we have learned, in the past, to have certain people lead our gatherings, moving into Spirit-led, participatory gatherings can be a daunting endeavor. The way to learn is to do it. Make mistakes. Learn some more. Don’t give up. Every person *is* a minister, and when we capture that in our times together it is incredibly rewarding. The body of Christ *can* reflect him in wonderful and varied ways when fully unleashed to do so.

EMPOWER OTHERS

REACH ✦ DISCIPLE ✦ GATHER ✦ EMPOWER ✦ MULTIPLY

We have discovered how easy it can be for *every* believer to be involved in the process of reaching, discipling, and gathering. These are not roles given to certain special ministers, but every person in Christ's body gets to be involved. The role of leadership, then, becomes about empowering people in these processes.

The Kingdom of God is not a Top-Down Hierarchy

Our old paradigms of "leadership" will not do because they come from top-down, hierarchical organizations. This type of structure is not new. It has similarities to all man-made structures such as the military, governments, and community organizations. The basic premise is that someone is over some, who are over others, so that decisions can be made and passed down in an efficient and productive manner. This is, in fact, a necessary form of leadership for most organizations to have in order to survive. It allows for order so that each person knows his or her part to play.

However, this understanding of leadership does not serve the true nature of God's kingdom. We know this because Jesus stated clearly that this type of leadership, associated with normal organizations, is simply not acceptable. He said it *would not do*.

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. *Not so with you* (emphasis added). Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:25-27 NIV

Jesus is doing more than challenging those who would use their authority abusively; he is describing the typical type of leadership that is used in human organizations where one person, by necessity, exercises *authority over* another. He says without reservation: “Not so with you.” This is *not* the type of leadership that will serve the purposes that God has for his people.

Why?

Because God’s kingdom is not a top-down, hierarchical organization. It is, instead, a living system. It is an organic network. It is a movement that is alive and led by God’s own Spirit. Jesus was not just dismissing authoritarian leadership; he was making it clear that typical, human-made structures and organizations will *not* serve God’s purposes. Our understanding of structures and leadership must shift entirely.

The Kingdom of God is a Living, Decentralized Network

Perhaps the best way to describe the alternative to top-down hierarchical organizations is the term “decentralized network.” This is a system that cannot be controlled because it takes on a life of its own. It describes living, organic systems as well as networks that informally and naturally grow and reproduce. Perhaps the best example of such a system is the internet itself. Who is in charge of the internet? Who is the president? Who are the board members? None of these questions fit because it is not a top-down hierarchy. It lacks centralized leadership. It is beyond the control of any one authority because it reproduces itself, grows, and functions like a living system. Yet, it has become the largest communication system in the world.

When Jesus said that we must not exercise authority the way that rulers and governments do, he was saying that, likewise, his kingdom was not to be put under the control of *any* human-structured organization. It is to be a living system, a decentralized network that could reproduce and grow at will. It is to take on a life of its own with every part involved in growing and

reproducing. He was saying that this type of living system requires a completely different type of leadership.

What Type of Leadership Supports a Living, Decentralized System?

Jesus goes on to describe the type of leadership that *would* support his kingdom: servants who give up themselves to empower others. He is acknowledging that his kingdom, a growing, full-of-life organism, can only be supported by leadership that does not exercise top-down control in any way—by people who willingly give their lives to lift up others, to give authority to others, and to encourage others to grow and reproduce. This type of leadership is in the very DNA of successful, decentralized networks. It allows for the continual lifting up of the next, who lifts up the next, who lifts up the next. It facilitates unlimited, dynamic reproduction.

Shifting from hierarchical leadership to a serving and empowering type of leadership involves real change:

- From *my* control to trusting the *Spirit's* control
- From displaying one's own gifts to revering the gifts of others
- From guiding to making room for the Spirit to guide
- From vision-leading to awakening the visions of others
- From priest to a company of priests
- From trying to be God's mouthpiece to helping others hear from God
- From titles and positions to servants of no repute

Mike Steele describes the *heart* of leadership this way: "A weeping father crying out for his sons to overtake him."

Letting Go of Control is the Heart of the Matter

Hierarchical organizations, by their nature, require control mechanisms. This is the primary hindrance to God's church in the

world today. By letting go of our human control, and letting go of organizational systems that require this type of control, the body of Christ is released to move into its full potential as a living, reproducing movement.

As Henri Nouwen says:

The way of a Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which the world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross... It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest.

As we let go of control-type leadership and top-down organizations, we become ready to use leadership gifts in a way that serves and empowers the body of Christ to reach her full potential. Positions are not needed for this. Titles that lift one above another are not necessary. Leaders simply function, in servant-fashion, using their gifts to help others grow into fruitfulness.

A leader is one because he or she reaches, disciples, and gathers others. In this sense, all become leaders to some extent. Some may have a special ability (i.e. apostolic, pastoral, or evangelistic) to reach and gather *many* disciples. This leader is still in a serving capacity, lifting others. He or she does not need to be in charge of or "over" a ministry. Rather, this person simply functions by building up the body of Christ and reproducing his or her own ministry in others. Everything is given away: spiritual authority, recognition, encouragement, opportunities to minister and serve. This leader empowers others so well that his or her own ministry goes virtually unrecognized.

When properly understood, we can see that God's purpose is to release a multitude of no-name, gifted leadership that will never be recognized yet who function in concert with God's purposes to serve and empower others.

Does Letting Go of Control Mean Out of Control?

Somehow, we have lost confidence in God's ability to lead and guide his church. There is an important role for empowering-servants (leaders) to play: reach out, disciple, gather, and then turn around and empower others to do the same. This is the lifestyle that God has called each of us to. We need empowering servants who flow in every level of giftedness described in Scripture. But we do not need organizational-style leadership, along with titles, status, or human control, for this to take place. The greatest church movements in history have been, seemingly, the most out-of-control. That is *exactly* where God is able to be the one *in* control.

Leaders who empower others, to empower others, who empower still others is the essential component needed to see the kingdom of God flourish and reproduce itself throughout the earth. Amazingly, God can lead all of his people as we do nothing more than lay down our lives for him and each other. As we let go of our human controls, Christ is able to be fully manifest through his people.

MULTIPLY

REACH ✦ DISCIPLE ✦ GATHER ✦ EMPOWER ✦ MULTIPLY

The real power of organic systems verses organizational ones is the potential for multiplication. This principle is seen throughout nature: one seed produces a crop of plants that produce fruit, multiplying into more seeds. Entire forests are populated without any human energy at all by the power of natural reproduction built into God's creation.

My friend Kevin Sutter, an organic church planting trainer, likes to hand out grains of rice to his students. He explains what happens with this one grain of rice based on only two plantings per year. At the end of one year the single grain can produce ten thousand plants. At the end of two years it can give birth to over one hundred million plants. This is nature's organic multiplication.

As we reach, disciple, gather, and then empower others to do the same, we are becoming part of God's divine, organic, multiplication process.

Jesus Used Organic Metaphors For a Reason

Jesus used organic metaphors to describe the kingdom of God because his work on the earth is meant to be a living, multiplying movement. Thus the well-known parable of the seed in Mark chapter 4.

"Listen!" Jesus taught, "A farmer went out to sow his seed (verse 3)." Later he explains: "This is what the kingdom of God is like (verse 26)."

Jesus goes on to describe the various seeds that do not take root and grow. He then ends the story by describing the seed that falls on *good* soil. "Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the

word, accept it, and produce a crop—*thirty, sixty or even a hundred times* (emphasis added) what was sown.”

This is the way of Jesus’ kingdom, the way that his kingdom grows and spreads, and the way that that the glory of God fills the earth. It does not require human-made organizations, just the proper care and cultivation of the life that is present in every believer.

Multiplication Begins at Spiritual Birth

Just as every new living thing has in it the power to reproduce, in the same way new believers, who have received Jesus’ new life, have the power in them to reproduce. We want to see this potential for multiplication unleashed at every new spiritual birth.

As soon as someone has experienced new life, we encourage them to share their story with others. The DNA of multiplying what God has put in us can begin the moment a person receives a new life in Christ. By sharing their story immediately with others, they become reproductive quickly and learn that they have unlimited potential to be used by God. A new disciple can begin reaching and discipling others by giving away immediately everything that he or she receives.

We like to baptize people publicly. We find that baptism is a wonderful opportunity to invite the person’s friends and families to a celebration. This allows the person who has experienced a new life to share that reality with others.

Reaching and discipling others can begin from day one. If a person is learning life lessons from his walk with God and his own process of being discipled, he can help others follow the same patterns and grow as well. New disciples can become disciplers by passing on their own experiences and pointing others to the same tools (Scripture, prayer) that are providing growth in their own life.

If gatherings are as simple as they are meant to be, then new believers can gather others. By simplifying gatherings back to basics, those who are new to Christ, and learning from others, can begin gathering other new believers or seekers together and follow the same patterns he is being taught.

When new believers can begin immediately to reach, disciple, and gather others, then the process of multiplication of God's kingdom can be unleashed in an incredibly powerful fashion.

Empowering others becomes natural to new believers. Finally, we see that new believers can become leaders in the best sense of that word. They learn that everything God gives them can be given away to help, strengthen, and lift up others. Thus they discover, from the outset, to become leaders who know how to serve and empower other people.

If we can see the simple principles of God's kingdom (reach, disciple, gather, empower, multiply) cultivated into the lives of *new* believers, then the natural power of God's life will reproduce itself without the need for human-made systems to control or motivate. *This is the wonder of true, organic multiplication.*

Church Planting Movements

The power of God's kingdom to reproduce itself exponentially is more than just theory. There are numerous examples of this from the days of the early church in the book of Acts to movements that are taking place in many parts of the world today. The term "church planting movements" is often used to describe those situations where disciples and churches are reproducing quickly and organically.

In David Garrison's book on church planting movements he notes many recent cases:

- In India a church planting movement produced 4,000 churches in less than seven years.

- In a northern Chinese province, over 500 hundred churches and 20,000 believers were birthed in less than five years.
- In an Asian Muslim country, more than 150,000 Muslims embrace Jesus and gather in more than 3,000 locally led Isa Jamaats (Jesus Groups).

Garrison concludes his book with the challenge that if we remove the obstacles and cultivate the principles that lead to this type of reproduction, these movements can, potentially, take place anywhere.

Principles that Aid Multiplication

Garrison lists several components that are present in every church planting movement including:

- Extraordinary prayer
- Abundant evangelism
- Intentional planting of reproducing churches
- The authority of God’s word
- Lay leadership
- House churches
- Churches planting churches

David Watson, who has been involved in church planting movements and training, suggests that there are several “counter-intuitive” principles that are helpful for healthy reproduction:

- Go slow to go fast. Be willing to invest in a few people who have the potential and DNA for reproduction.
- Share only when and where people are ready to hear.
- It’s about discovery, not preaching or teaching. Use inductive, participatory methods for scripture study.
- Obedience is more important than knowledge.
- Let the lost (who are seekers) lead Bible studies.
- The best time for a church to plant a church is when it is new.

- Expect the hardest places to yield the greatest results.

Can We Trust the Power of the Seed?

The seed that God plants in the life of every believer is his power and word. It has the dynamic in it to produce growth, life, power, and reproduction. Jesus said we were to “produce much fruit.” He did not ask us to do something that he has not empowered us to do. We can trust that well-planted seeds in hearts that are given proper, basic care will produce a harvest without extensive toiling, planning, or organizing. As we learn to trust God in this area, we can plant and nurture while letting the Spirit of God do the heavy lifting of growing and multiplying his life in and through others.

One of my missionary friends likes to tell people that, when it comes to ministering to others, most of us only need to remember two things:

1. It is simpler than we make it.
2. We can trust God more than we do.

This is a great reminder that God has the power to fulfill his word on the earth. It further reminds us that our work with him is simple: reach, disciple, gather, empower, and then let it multiply.

INTIMACY WITH JESUS

“A man touched by the Spirit of God suddenly says—‘Now I see Who Jesus is,’ and that is the source of devotion.” Oswald Chamber

Having discussed the core principles of walking out our life and ministry with Jesus, we want to remind ourselves that there is only one *core* value: to live in intimacy and devotion to Jesus Christ.

Jesus did not invite us to follow a religion of rules, nor did he mandate an order of service or church structure to follow. He did ask us to follow *him*. Out of that flows all of the life, joy, and power that we need to live fully in him and for him.

Confessing My Religiosity

Though I have sought to be, first and foremost, a lover of God, I have found that I have often fallen into patterns of religious thinking and action as a replacement to intimacy with him. It is my confession that at times I have:

- Reduced my Christian walk to a routine devotional time and a rote church service attendance.
- Become more concerned about being accepted by my fellow church-attending peers than bringing joy to God’s heart and purposes.
- Cared more about being seen by others as a worshipper than actually being in God’s presence.
- Shown more concern for the success of church programs and projects than for the people involved whom God cherishes.
- Been more concerned about being “right” than about loving rightly.

Fortunately, God has a wonderful way of allowing my religious world to crumble so that I can be wooed back into deep, heartfelt relationship with him. Only because of this grace am I able to return again and again to the place where my soul resonates with the song-writer who wrote: “Just give me Jesus.”

God Pursues Ever-Deepening Intimacy With Us

The experience of intimacy with God does not have an endpoint. It grows throughout our lifetime and is always initiated by his ability to draw us deeper.

We often begin by knowing God as our Forgiver. Our experience with the cross of Jesus Christ brings us into an encounter with God’s grace that initiates in us a deep, loving response toward him. Brennan Manning expresses this well:

Jesus comes not for the super-spiritual but for the wobbly and the weak-kneed who know they don’t have it all together, and who are not too proud to accept the handout of amazin’ grace. As we glance up, we are astonished to find the eyes of Jesus open with wonder, deep with understanding, and gentle with compassion.

We also learn to know God as our Father. As God continues to draw us into his heart, we become acquainted with his deep, parental passion toward us. This changes the way we see ourselves as we recognize that we are deeply cared about for who we are, and it builds our trust in him as we become aware of his constant care and attention.

Yet there is always more, as Jesus informs his disciples that they are to be his friends. We discover that there is no end to the depth of relationship that God desires with us and offers to us. Although we make many mis-steps on the journey into intimacy with Jesus—faltering, hesitating, becoming religious and proud, distancing, retreating—God never gives up on his quest to be close to us.

Solitude and Listening

If I were to point to one great need for us, as God's people, who desire to experience a deeper intimacy with God, it would be the need for more solitude out of which comes a more available listening heart. Henri Nouwen speaks to this:

Solitude is being with God and God alone. Is there any space for that in your life?

Why is it so important that you are with God and God alone on the mountain top? It's important because it's the place in which you can listen to the voice of the One who calls you the beloved. To pray is to listen to the One who calls you "my beloved daughter," "my beloved son," "my beloved child." To pray is to let that voice speak to the center of your being, to your guts, and let that voice resound in your whole being...

Solitude is where spiritual ministry begins. That's where Jesus listened to God. That's where we listen to God.

No Replacement for Intimacy

While this book is not a devotional, we are reminded that all that is life-giving proceeds from intimacy with Jesus. We can put into place models, principles, good ideas, plans, strategies, or structures, but if our life is not centered on the pursuit of Jesus, it will all be dead religion. Conversely, if our life is rooted in abiding and resting in the presence of Jesus, then ministry, service, joy, and goodness will overflow from us without effort. He will naturally bubble up through us.

When all is said and done, we want to renew our hearts to:

- Love God with our whole hearts.
- Follow Jesus with undivided attention.
- Listen to Jesus' word and voice in every situation.
- Be passionate about God's purposes on the earth.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What About Children?

The implication behind this question is that children are going to lose out if there is not an array of formal children's programs to teach and take care of them.

The assumption is that the "Sunday School" program provided by traditional churches is the best way to raise up spiritual kids. The fact is, the majority of children raised in these programs exit youth group after high school (if they have lasted that long) and do not become regular church-goers. This is not to say that something of value didn't take place, but it does point out that we are not getting the "results" that we hoped for.

There is potential in the house church for far better results. Children will spend more time with their families in worship and seeing their family members involved in spiritual activities. Wayne Jacobsen writes:

I'd suggest that what [children] need most is to be integrated into God's life through relational fellowship with other believers. 92% of children who grow up in Sunday schools with all the puppets and high-powered entertainment, leave 'church' when they leave their parents' home...

Even sociologists tell us that the #1 factor in determining whether a child will thrive in society is if they have deep, personal friendships with non-relative adults. No Sunday school can fill that role. I know of one community in Australia who after 20 years of sharing God's life together as families could say that they had not lost one child to the faith as they grew into adulthood. I know I cut across the grain here, but it is far more important that our children experience real fellowship among believers rather than the bells and whistles of a slick children's program.

What About Finances?

One of the most significant arguments for keeping church gatherings simple is the need to use finances for need-meeting kingdom projects.

There is no one way to handle finances. Some church gatherings give collectively into a common pool and then make decisions together about how the money is to be used. This provides a wonderful opportunity for believers to listen to God's leading and use their resources for meeting needs, supporting workers, sending missionaries, caring for the poor, or however else they might be led.

We use three principles to guide us in the area of finances:

1. We want to be generous. Our life and finances are not our own and we want to be people who hold loosely to material things and give continually and generously.
2. We want to care for the poor. This reflects the life, purpose, and heartbeat of Jesus Christ.
3. We want to strategically support the spreading of the kingdom of God. Sometimes this means that we will support workers or missionaries who can be effective in helping new works to start among new people-groups.

What About Networking?

When disciples are made and churches gathered which, in turn, reproduce more disciples and churches, there is a natural networking of those people and groups together. This can provide many opportunities for mutual encouragement, training, and working together on projects. This type of networking can be facilitated informally through relationships with one another, or it can function as a more formal network as long as the structures remain simple and fluid and do not constrain growth or reproduction.

It is also important to build relationship, as much as possible, with the whole body of Christ in a region or city. God works regionally (i.e. “the church in Ephesus”), and it is beneficial to build bridges with all kingdom-minded believers in our area.

Finally, building relationships with like-minded simple/house church believers around the world can provide tremendous support and encouragement. Because of the internet, it has become easier than ever to connect with people from all over the planet who are seeking to live meaningful, Jesus-following lives while gathering simply.

What About What About?

There are so many questions that could be asked, but often we need to test the waters, jump in, and trust that God will lead and bring direction as it is needed.

There are no experts, just many people who are exploring this journey together. We want to continue to listen to each other and learn from one another as God unfolds his church for the next generation.

If there is one overall lesson, it is to learn from others, but listen and follow the Holy Spirit. This is the adventure we are called to and we do not want to miss it by trying to duplicate the work of someone else. God is an infinitely creative God. Our desire to see his church unleashed in every neighborhood of the world is centered on the longing to see God himself unleashed. Through us, as we lay down whatever hinders and give ourselves fully to him, he will accomplish this. His glory will fill the earth.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

The author blogs on simple/house church subjects at this location:

www.simplechurchjournal.com

The following website is being designed as a place to find resources and tools that will assist planters of simple/house churches and networks. It will be updated regularly:

www.simplechurchrevolution.com

For information on an inductive bible study method that is easy to use and reproduce, and for other excellent information on church planting movements, see this website:

www.cpmtr.org

There are numerous resources available to help train and coach church planters at this site:

www.cpcoaches.com

For an online community of simple church planters you can take a look at the following site and contact the author if you would like to be a part of this community.

www.lk10.com

You can contact the author at:

rogerthoman@gmail.com