

IS HOUSE CHURCH THE ANSWER?

by Felicity Dale

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The simple church movement is gaining momentum. Recent media attention, both secular and Christian, reinforces our understanding that we are part of a sociological phenomenon that is impacting our world.

As thrilling as this is, we must stop and recognize that there are some inherent dangers in approaching the tipping point.

We may soon receive reports that go something like this: “I tried house church for a year. I bought the t-shirt, read the books, went to the conference, but it wasn’t for me.” “It didn’t work—and besides, there was nothing for my kids. I’m going back to my old church.”

Are we misleading people when we say that this move of God through simple churches could be as big as the Reformation?

As people hop on the bandwagon of this latest fad hoping that this time, all their problems with church will be solved, they will bring their baggage with them. As they bring all of their expectations and wounds into our homes, many will be disappointed.

Simple church is not a “feel good, goose bumps” movement. While home-based fellowships will be fresh and exciting at first, as people trade the formal sermons for informal meals, they will inevitably reach the point where they miss the programs that traditional church can offer. Simple churches just can’t provide the professional quality of the large-scale worship, the teaching, and, of course, the kids’ programs.

So what can we do to prepare for this potential disillusionment?

RECOGNIZE DEATH VALLEY

Wolfgang Simson describes what happens when Christians transition from traditional church to simple church. They can see the mountaintop of simple church from their position on the summit of the mountain of traditional, legacy church. It looks so close and so inviting that they assume they can move directly from one mountaintop to another. What they do not see is the unavoidable “death valley” between the two. Leaving the mountaintop of legacy church involves a dying process—dying to good things—the diversity of the programs, the excellent teaching, the worship band, and the professional leadership. It takes time to learn to appreciate the informality of the 24/7 lifestyle of the house church, and to truly understand at a gut level that a church gathering really can be as simple as a group of people hanging out in His presence, hearing His voice and following His agenda for their time together.

This is not a sudden, painless death. It can be agonizingly slow, sometimes in terms of years, and the temptation to bail out of the

process can be overwhelming. So some house churches may fail because we fail to press through “death valley.”

Cry out to God for fresh vision. Seek His face, begging Him to show you how a vibrant family of Jesus within geographical and cultural reaches of every person can transform a nation.

“HONEY, I SHRUNK THE CHURCH!”

Church is not based on where we meet. Although we have found that most of the core values of the New Testament church are easier to foster within a more intimate environment such as our homes, one of the biggest mistakes a simple church can make is to merely swap the four walls of the church building for the four walls of the living room. As John White likes to say, all we can claim is, “Honey, I shrunk the church!” Someone has been asked to lead the worship, and another has been asked to teach. We are holding church, as we have always known it, in our living rooms, and doing it badly! The single guitarist does not get the chords right. There is no one to prepare an intellect stretching teaching.

But a true simple church gathering is just that—simple. We are a community of Jesus lovers with the “naïve” belief that the Holy Spirit’s agenda is more important than our own, and a willingness to press through to reach it. 1 Corinthians 14:26 describes our times together where each person’s contribution is valued and important. Once we have tasted this on a regular basis, nothing else will satisfy.

LACK OF MISSIONAL DNA

Simple church is, above all, a change in DNA. It is a paradigm shift in how the church of Jesus Christ thinks and operates. Neil Cole describes organic church DNA as: Divine Truth Nurturing Relationships Apostolic Mission

If any of these are missing, a simple church will have challenges. The most likely of these core values to be absent is Apostolic Mission. If this is primarily a movement of people leaving the building to meet in small groups, then all we have seen is transfer growth, not true Kingdom expansion.

If a simple church does not have a deliberate outward focus, sooner or later it will become stagnant. For most of us, our difficulty is that all our friends are Christians. We effectively live in Christian ghettos of our own making. Our “third place,” the place where we go to relax, where everyone knows our name, is church. But most unbelievers will not darken the doors of our legacy churches, and they simply do not know or understand what simple church is or how to get involved in one.

In the Gospels, Jesus told His disciples to go (Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 10:3). They were to cross the culture barrier, to get out of their familiar environment, and to reach out to others with the Good News. To do this, we should see the simple church like melting a block of ice. Each person is encouraged to go out into their world to “be Jesus” to those around them, and like water, they will seep into every crack and crevice of society.

Jesus has a passion for the world, and we can ask Him to break our hearts with His heart for those around us who are lost and hurting. The simple church movement is changing the landscape of Western Christianity. Let's make sure that it stays simple by hearing Jesus' voice and obeying Him.