

## SIZE STRATEGY FOR EFFECTIVE MINISTRY

When it comes to the size of a church, it's easy to assume that bigger is better. But is it really? Instead of 1,000 people in one church, might it be better to have 100 people in 10 churches? For its first two hundred years, the church met in the private homes of its members. Since everything in the New Testament was written to a church that met in someone's home, the body-life activities set forth as ideal were designed for smaller settings. God used these small churches to turn the Roman world upside down (**Acts 17:6**). Smaller churches have strategic, divinely-designed size advantages for effective ministry.

### PROFIT

Is your church small? If so, you have lots of company. Sixty percent of all Protestant churches in the United States have fewer than 100 adults attending.<sup>1</sup> Worldwide, more than one *billion* Christians worship in churches with fewer than 250 people—small-church pastors shepherd more than one billion of God's sheep.<sup>2</sup>

Good things really do come in small packages. Smaller settings foster the simplicity, intimacy, unity, love, support, and accountability that characterized the early church. The relationships described in the New Testament work best in situations in which everyone knows everyone else. A loving, family-like atmosphere is more easily developed. The many "one another" exhortations of Scripture can be more realistically lived out. Church discipline takes on genuine significance. Disciple-making is natural and personal. Participatory worship is better suitable for smaller settings. Celebrating the Lord's Supper with the *agapé* love feast is more natural in a smaller setting. Achieving congregational consensus is easier when everyone knows everyone else and open lines of communication genuinely exist. Involvement with a smaller church can be a wonderful blessing with strategic, divinely-designed advantages.

**Charles Spurgeon** opined: "It strikes me that there would be a great deal of good done if persons who have large rooms in their houses would endeavor to get together little congregations .... Where there is a Church in the house, every member strives to increase the other's comfort, all seek to promote each other's holiness, each one endeavors to discharge his duty according to the position in which he is placed in that Church."<sup>3</sup>

No less a Reformation luminary than **Martin Luther** wrote: "Those ... desirous of being Christians in earnest ... should ... assemble by themselves in some house ... those whose conduct was not such as befits Christians could be recognized, reprov'd ... or excommunicated.... Here we could have baptism and the sacrament ... and direct everything towards the Word and prayer and love...." Smaller churches have strategic, divinely-designed size advantages for effective ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> "Small Churches Struggle to Grow Because of the People They Attract," Barna.org, accessed August 26, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Vaters, "The Astonishing Power of Small Churches: Over One Billion Served," ChristianityToday.com, accessed August 30, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Spurgeon, "A Pastoral Visit," ccel.org. Accessed Sept 4, 2020.

## PROOF

According to Yale University archaeologists: “The first Christian congregations worshipped in private houses, meeting at the homes of wealthier members on a rotating basis.... Worship was generally conducted in the atrium, or central courtyard of the house.”<sup>4</sup> For example Philemon, who was wealthy enough to own a slave, hosted a church in his home (**Phlm 2b**). Church hostess Lydia was a prosperous businesswoman who sold expensive purple fabric and could afford household servants (**Acts 16:14**). Churches met in the various homes of Aquila and Priscilla, a couple involved in the evidently lucrative first-century tent-making trade (**Acts 18:1–3**).<sup>5</sup> Gaius had a home big enough to host the sizable Corinthian congregation (**1Co 1:14; Ro 16:23**).

Less well known is the fact that the early church continued the practice of home meetings for hundreds of years after the apostolic era. **Graydon Snyder** of Chicago Theological Seminary observed: “The New Testament Church began as a small group house church (Col. 4:15), and it remained so until the middle or end of the third century. There are no evidences of larger places of meeting before 300.”<sup>6</sup> **Snyder** also stated: “There is no literary evidence nor archaeological indication that any such home was converted into an extant church building. Nor is there any extant church that certainly was built prior to Constantine.”<sup>7</sup>

The real issue is not where a church meets but how it can best do what God requires of it. Size plays an important role. Having too many people in attendance can defeat the purpose of holding a local church meeting. Large crowds are great for occasional praise concerts, teaching (**Mt 4:25-5:1**), or evangelism (**Acts 5:12-14, 19**). Such meetings are necessarily relatively impersonal. However, the weekly local church gathering is supposed to offer such personalized benefits as mutual edification, accountability, community, and fellowship. In keeping with the New Testament example, the ideal size for a congregation might be the number of people who would fit in a first-century Roman villa.<sup>8</sup> Smaller churches have strategic, divinely-designed size advantages for effective ministry.

## PROFESSORS

Regarding the meeting places of early church meetings, Reformed scholar **William Hendriksen** said: “Since in the first and second centuries church buildings in the sense in which we think of them today were not yet in existence, families would hold services in their own homes.”<sup>9</sup>

Anglican priest and evangelist **David Watson** stated: “For the first two centuries, the church met in small groups in the homes of its members, apart from special gatherings in public lecture halls or market places, where people could come together in much larger numbers. Significantly, these two centuries mark the most powerful and vigorous advance of the church, which perhaps has never been equaled.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Unearthing the Christian Building,” *Dura-Europos: Excavating Antiquity* (Yale University Art Gallery), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Through his tentmaking, Paul was able to support not only himself but also his traveling companions (at least seven men Acts 20:4, 34).

<sup>6</sup> Snyder, *Church Life*, 166.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 16:40, 20:20; Ro 16:3–5a, 16:23; 1Co 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 1–2b; Jam 2:3. Though Scripture never states this, it is possible that churches also met in tenement housing, *insula*, which were not as large as the Roman villas.

<sup>9</sup> William Hendriksen, “Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans,” *New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 22.

<sup>10</sup> David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978), 121.

**Martin Selman** of Spurgeon’s College in London wrote: “The theme of the ‘household of God’ undoubtedly owed much to the function of the house in early Christianity as a place of meeting and fellowship (e.g. 2 Tim. 4:19; Phm. 2; 2 Jn. 10).”<sup>11</sup>

**W. H. Griffith Thomas**, co-founder of the Dallas Theological Seminary, opined: “For two or three centuries, Christians met in private houses.... There seems little doubt that these informal gatherings of small groups of believers had great influence in preserving the simplicity and purity of early Christianity.”<sup>12</sup>

Seminary professor **Ronald Sider** concluded: “The early church was able to defy the decadent values of Roman civilization precisely because it experienced the reality of Christian fellowship in a mighty way.... Christian fellowship meant unconditional availability to and unlimited liability for the other sisters and brothers—emotionally, financially and spiritually. When one member suffered, they all suffered. When one rejoiced, they all rejoiced (1 Cor. 12:26). When a person or church experienced economic trouble, the others shared without reservation. And when a brother or sister fell into sin, the others gently restored the straying person (Mt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2:5–11; Gal. 6:1–3). The sisters and brothers were available to each other, liable for each other and accountable to each other. The early church, of course, did not always fully live out the New Testament vision of the body of Christ. There were tragic lapses. But the network of tiny house churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire did experience their oneness in Christ so vividly that they were able to defy and eventually conquer a powerful, pagan civilization. The overwhelming majority of churches today, however, do not provide the context in which brothers and sisters can encourage, admonish and disciple each other. We desperately need new settings and structures for watching over one another in love.”<sup>13</sup> Smaller churches have strategic, divinely-designed size advantages for effective ministry.

## PATTERN

What are we to do with the fact that the early church met mostly in homes? The most common explanation for the existence of early house churches was the pressure of persecution. Their situation was similar to that in China or Iran today. However, even without persecution, might the apostles have intended to lay out a purposeful pattern for smaller congregations? It is a design axiom that form follows function. Meeting in a smaller setting would have a practical effect on an individual’s church life. The apostles’ belief about the *function* of the church was naturally expressed in the first-century *form* of the church. Some distinct practices of those early small churches are worth considering:<sup>14</sup>

1. **The Church as Family:** The overarching significance of the New Testament church lies in its theology of community. Apostolic writers used words pertaining to family to describe the church. Believers are God’s children (**1Jn 3:1**) who have been born into His spiritual family (**Jn 1:12–13**). God’s people are thus seen as part of His household (**Eph 2:19; Gal 6:10**). They are called brothers and sisters (**Phlm 2; Ro 16:2**). Consequently, Christians are to relate to one another as members of a family (**1Ti 5:1–2; Ro 16:13**). Out of the theological truth that God’s children are a spiritual family arise many issues surrounding church practices. This includes the congregation size that best facilitates functioning as

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Selman, “House,” *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1982), 498.

<sup>12</sup> W. H. Griffith Thomas, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 422–423.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1977), 190–191.

<sup>14</sup> Special thanks to Stephen David of Hyderabad, India for significant contributions to this section.

God's family. According to Fuller seminary professor **Robert Banks**: "Even the meetings of the 'whole church' were small enough for a relatively intimate relationship to develop between the members."<sup>15</sup>

2. **One-Another Ministry:** The Scriptures are full of "one another" commands.<sup>16</sup> A church should be characterized by mutual encouragement, accountability, interpersonal relationships, community, and church discipline. These ideals are best accomplished in smaller congregations where people know and love one another. They will not be easily achieved in a large auditorium filled with people who are relative strangers. Nominal Christianity is harbored in settings where it is easy to get lost in the crowd. Smaller churches can best foster the simplicity, vitality, intimacy, and purity that God desires for His Church.
3. **Participatory Worship:** Early church meetings were clearly participatory (**1Co 14:26ff**). Because public speaking is a great fear for many, participatory meetings are best suited to smaller gatherings of people who know and love one another. After the church meetings in the atriums of Roman villas were replaced by meetings in much larger basilicas, participatory worship was replaced with scripted, stage-like performances by professionals. The practical reality of the priesthood of the believer was lost until the Reformation.
4. **Communion Fellowship:** The Lord's Supper was originally celebrated weekly as an actual meal (the *agapé* feast, **1Co 11**). Each local church is to be like a family. One of the most common things that families do is to eat together. The larger the congregation, the less family-like and more impersonal will be the Lord's Supper as an actual meal. Early church meetings, centered around the Lord's Table, were times of great fellowship, community, and encouragement. Rather than being observed in a funereal atmosphere, the Lord's Supper was joyfully celebrated in anticipation of the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb.
5. **Congregational Consensus:** Each New Testament church had a plurality of clearly identified leaders who led more by example and persuasion rather than command. Building consensus among the members of the congregation was important in decision-making. Consensus can be achieved in a church in which everyone knows one another, loves one another, bears with one another, is patient with one another, and is committed to one another. A smaller informal setting is an effective place for building consensus. However, the larger the fellowship, the more difficult it is to maintain relationships and lines of communication. Intimacy suffers. The pastor becomes inaccessible and will necessarily function like a corporate chief executive officer.
6. **Multiplication:** Small churches have great potential for growth through multiplication. New churches grow faster than older ones.<sup>17</sup> New leaders should be continually trained to go out to start new churches. We need to think small in a really big way. Rather than growing a single church ever bigger, we should consider sending clusters of people out to start other churches. We should commit to being a small church that starts other small churches that start yet other small churches.
7. **Resource Allocation:** The Director of Missions for the San Antonio Baptist Association, **Charles Price**, lamented that the typical cost of starting a new church in North America

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 41–42.

<sup>16</sup> There are more than fifty of these commands, such as love one another, give preference to one another, encourage one another, agree with one another, accept one another, and submit to one another.

<sup>17</sup> "Why Do Newly Planted Churches Grow Faster than Older Churches?" [rmdc.org](http://rmdc.org), accessed September 1, 2016.

was an astounding two million dollars.<sup>18</sup> **Jim Henry**, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando stated: “Our two church plants are going to cost us about \$2,450,000 over a three-year period.”<sup>19</sup> In light of these staggering figures, we must be creative in finding cost-effective meeting places as our small churches start new small churches. Options include renting an apartment clubhouse, dance academy, storefront, school cafeteria, or community center. Older, kingdom-minded congregations may be willing to let others use their buildings after their services are over. The possibility of meeting in someone’s home under the right circumstances should not be ruled out. It can still be a viable option: perhaps, the best one. A suitable home would have a large gathering area and ample off-street parking (a problem first-century house churches did not have to deal with). Some homeowners have built what appears to be a four-car garage behind their home for the church to meet in.

### PROPORTIONS

Because first-century churches met almost exclusively in private homes, the typical congregation of the apostolic era was relatively small.<sup>20</sup> Though house churches were at the opposite end of the spectrum from modern-day megachurches, it is important to avoid the mistake of thinking *too* small. The size should be just right: not too big and not too small (neither mega nor micro). There were no more people than would fit in a wealthy person’s home (in the atrium, courtyard, or living area). The **Matthew 18** restoration process detailed by Jesus clearly assumes more people than “us four and no more.” There was a single house church meeting in Corinth; counting the people using their spiritual gifts in **1 Corinthians 14** reveals a surprising number of believers. Early house churches were able to support qualified widows and elders. This would have required more than just a handful of believers (**1Ti 5:3–16**). Having a plurality of elders in a church is unlikely in a setting that is too small (**Acts 14:23**). The early churches meeting in Roman villas typically consisted of scores of people, not hundreds and certainly not thousands.<sup>21</sup>

As previously noted, Scripture indicates that early churches met in the homes of their wealthier members. This may have been because of the larger size of the homes and the hosts’ ability to provide much of the food for the love feasts. The challenge in worshiping in a home today is that the largest room in modern homes is often far smaller than the largest room in first-century Roman villas. They were big, semipublic houses. Rooms facing the street were often businesses. A hallway between them led into the atrium, at the far end of which was the business office. It was not unusual for strangers to be in and out of a home. In addition, multiple generations of a family typically dwelled under the same roof. There were large areas, such as the atrium, in which the church could gather. Beyond the business office was an even larger semi-covered enclosed courtyard. Spacious living rooms were often built around the courtyard. Enough believers were able to gather for a variety of spiritual gifts to be manifested, for multiple people to be present who had the same gift, for there to be a plurality of elders, and for qualified pastor-teachers to be financially supported. (The pastor-teachers were thus free to devote themselves to disciple-making, in-depth teaching, and leadership.)

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<sup>18</sup> Email exchange with author, May 8, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> “How Much Does It Cost to Start a Church?” MissionalChallenge.com, accessed September 1, 2016.

<sup>20</sup> While it cannot be said with certainty that every church met in a home, it is a fact that when a meeting place is specified in Scripture, it is in a home. Perhaps some congregations met in larger buildings; however, this argument is based on assumptions.

<sup>21</sup> The Jerusalem Church had thousands of members who meet at various houses (Acts 5:42). The short-lived, large meetings in the temple were special ministry meetings rather than regular church meetings.

The meeting room of the Lullingstone Villa house church in Kent, England (built during the Roman occupation) was approximately 15 feet by 21 feet.<sup>22</sup> By modern standards, this would seat approximately 50 people.<sup>23</sup> An examination of floor plans in Pompeii shows that the typical atrium was 20 feet by 28 feet.<sup>24</sup> This would seat 60 to 80 people. The *ESV Study Bible* notes that early Christian churches “met in homes.... There is extensive archaeological evidence from many cites showing that some homes were structurally modified to hold such churches.”<sup>25</sup> One such modified home that was known to host a church was found in Dura-Europos in modern Syria. According to the archaeologists who excavated it, it could seat 65 to 70 people.<sup>26</sup> Since early believers had more of an Asian mindset about personal space, it may have seated more than 70 people. **Jerome Murphy-O’Connor** measured six homes in Pompeii and Ephesus and found the average atrium size to be nearly 800 square feet.<sup>27</sup> This would seat approximately 100 people. Luke recorded that 120 believers were assembled in the upper room of a house (**Acts 1:13, 15, 2:1–2**).

In *The Tipping Point*, **Malcolm Gladwell** quoted British anthropologist **Robin Dunbar** on the Rule of 150: “The figure of 150 seems to represent the maximum number of individuals with whom we can have a genuinely social relationship, the kind of relationship that goes with knowing who they are and how they relate to us.”<sup>28</sup> **Dunbar** noted, for example, that military units are typically kept at fewer than 150 because “orders can be implemented and unruly behavior controlled on the basis of personal loyalties and direct man-to-man contacts.”<sup>29</sup> Another example cited was the Hutterites, Anabaptist communalists, who for hundreds of years have had a strict policy of splitting a colony into two when it approaches 150 people. The Hutterites discovered that with a greater number, people became divided and alienated. Hutterite leader **Bill Gross** opined: “Keeping things under 150 just seems to be the best and most efficient way to manage a group of people.... When things get larger than that, people become strangers to one another.” He said that as a colony approaches 150, “You get two or three groups within the larger group. That is something you really try to prevent, and when it happens it is a good time to branch out.”<sup>30</sup> **Gladwell** concluded: “The size of a group is another one of those subtle contextual factors that can make a big difference.... Crossing the 150 line is a small change that can make a big difference.”<sup>31</sup>

When first-century congregations grew, they obviously did not erect ever-bigger buildings. Instead, they multiplied, continually training leaders and sending out subgroups to plant new churches. Following this approach, rather than growing a congregation ever larger, our goal should be to start new small churches that start other small churches.<sup>32</sup> Small churches align very much with the size of the apostolic churches that met in Roman villas.

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<sup>22</sup> “Lullingstone Roman Villa,” English-Heritage.org.uk. Measurements taken from schematic.

<sup>23</sup> “Space Calculator for Banquet & Meeting Rooms,” BanquetTablesPro.com, accessed October 4, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1875), 430.

<sup>25</sup> Dennis, *ESV Study*, 2217.

<sup>26</sup> Synder, *Church Life*, 70. The impluvium was tiled, and benches were added around the walls. In addition, a wall between adjoining rooms was removed, thus creating a 714-square-foot area. A raised area was added at the front. Whether this was for a podium is unclear.

<sup>27</sup> Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Saint Paul’s Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 180.

<sup>28</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2002), 179.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 180, 182, 186.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 182–183.

<sup>32</sup> Helpful resource: *Becoming a Level Five Multiplying Church Field Guide* by Wilson & Ferguson (Exponential Resources, 2015).

## PERSPECTIVE

Small churches have both advantages and disadvantages. They can play to their relational strengths by incorporating various ancient church growth strategies (see previous chapters). According to the Barna Group's research, people younger than 35 years are the most likely group to consider attending a small church. Their desire is to be known and to feel connected. This can be more difficult to achieve in larger churches. On the other hand, people with children were often looking for a church that offers an impressive children's ministry. Such programs require funding for first-class facilities and the hiring of competent staff. This would be financially difficult for smaller churches.<sup>33</sup> However, most small churches do not follow the previously mentioned growth strategies of the ancient church. The adoption of these strategies makes a big difference in attracting and retaining people.

Leading a small church to adopt early church practices will result in blessing. It will foster spiritual growth. It will likely create a contagious excitement that will lead to numerical growth. The temptation is to enjoy this growth, allowing the original church to become much bigger than a typical church in the apostolic era. Instead of pursuing the continual growth of a single congregation, maintaining the New Testament example of multiplying Roman villa-sized churches should be the goal. Reproduction should be built into the church's DNA. There is a need to continually teach the men to be leaders in their homes and the church. New leaders from within should be trained. Once the leadership is in place, a sizable portion of the original church should be sent out to start another small church.

## PRACTICUM

**Strategically Small:** Megachurch pastor **Adrian Rogers** joked to those in his congregation who preferred a smaller church: "Just sit in one of the first ten rows and don't look back!"<sup>34</sup> However, a genuine advantage for small churches lies in being positioned to reap strategic benefits from adopting the small-church growth strategies of the ancient church. This includes participatory worship, the weekly Lord's Supper (*agapé*), a plurality of co-equal elders who lead with the servant love of Christ, a commitment to congregational consensus, and an understanding of the vital importance of making disciples by regularly teaching people to observe all that Jesus commanded. Small churches that follow the ways of the early church are in a good position to offer what many are looking for: genuine fellowship, lasting and transparent relationships, and less politics.

**Church Houses:** A church house is not the church; it is just a sheep shed. Thus, **Donald Guthrie** concluded: "The expression 'in church' (*en ekklesia*) ... refers to an assembly of believers. There is no suggestion of a special building. Indeed, the idea of a church as representing a building is totally alien to the NT."<sup>35</sup> It is interesting that the New Testament is devoid of any instructions for the construction of special buildings for worship. This is far different from Mosaic legislation, which contained exacting blueprints for the tabernacle. When the New Covenant writers broached this subject, they pointed out that the believers themselves are the temple of the Holy Spirit: living stones that come together to constitute a spiritual house with Jesus Christ as the Chief Cornerstone (**1Pe 2:4-5; Eph 2:19-22; 1Co 3:16, 6:19**). Itinerant English Bible teacher **Arthur Wallis** said: "In the Old Testament, God had a sanctuary for His people; in the New, God has His people as a

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<sup>33</sup> "Small Churches Struggle to Grow Because of the People They Attract," Barna.org, accessed September 01, 2016.

<sup>34</sup> Adrian Rogers, *Adrianisms* (Collierville, TN: Innovo Publishing, 2015), 266.

<sup>35</sup> Guthrie, *Theology*, 744.

sanctuary.”<sup>36</sup> Southern Baptist pastor **John Havlik** offered these penetrating words: “The church is never a place, but always a people; never a fold but always a flock; never a sacred building but always a believing assembly. The church is you who pray, not where you pray. A structure of brick or marble can no more be the church than your clothes of serge or satin can be you. There is in this world ... no sanctuary of man but the soul.”<sup>37</sup>

Some Christians place too much emphasis on church buildings. **Bernard of Clairvaux** wrote: “I will not dwell upon the vast height of their churches, their unconscionable length, their preposterous breadth, their richly polished paneling, all of which distracts the eyes of the worshipper and hinders his devotion. You throw money into your decorations ... your candlesticks as tall as trees, great masses of bronze of exquisite workmanship, and as dazzling with their precious stones as the lights that surmount them, what, think you, is the purpose of all this? Will it melt a sinner's heart and not rather keep him gazing in wonder? O vanity of vanities—no, insanity rather than vanity!”<sup>38</sup>

Due diligence is needed before spending exorbitant amounts acquiring church buildings that will sit empty most of the week. This is money that might be better spent on disciple-making, evangelism, benevolence, or support for pastors and missionaries. **Charles Spurgeon** asked: “Does God need a house? He who made the heavens and the earth, does he dwell in temples made with hands? What crass ignorance this is! No house beneath the sky is more holy than the place where a Christian lives, and eats, and drinks, and sleeps, and praises the Lord in all that he does, and there is no worship more heavenly than that which is presented by holy families, devoted to the fear of the Lord.”<sup>39</sup> The real issue is, thus, not where a church meets, but where and how it can best do what God requires of it.

**House Churches:** Under the right circumstances, a private home can be the ideal setting for a church meeting. **J. Vernon McGee** predicted: “As the church started in the home, it is going to come back to the home.”<sup>40</sup> The smaller homey setting fosters genuine friendships. The celebration of the Lord’s Supper as a fellowship meal in this relaxed, unhurried, comfortable setting helps to build unity and love. A home is not big enough to accommodate a huge number of people. Thus, participatory worship in which each person contributes according to his spiritual gifts is much more intimate and meaningful. Meeting in a suitable private dwelling is a good use of scarce financial resources. Every member’s participation and ministry were highly valued and encouraged in the early church. Thus, a large home is still a setting in which every person can comfortably contribute and function for the edification of the whole body of Christ. House churches can be simple, wonderful, down-to-earth (yet touching heaven) expressions of new covenant church life. Another advantage of a church that meets in a home is that the money that would normally have gone toward rent can be used to support a pastor.

Houston Baptist University professor **Peter Davids** and German Baptist pastor **Siegfried Grossmann** offered this studied insight: “The witness of the New Testament is clear: the living space of the church was the house. We judge the church-historical development to be a step backward from relationship to religion. Today, a new desire for a face-to-face fellowship has broken out. For too long we have exclusively seen the formal church services as the center of the church and neglected our concrete life together in houses. We cannot slavishly imitate what took

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<sup>36</sup> Arthur Wallis, *The Radical Christian* (Rancho Cordova, CA: City Hill Publishing, 1987).

<sup>37</sup> John Havlik, *People-Centered Evangelism* (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), 47.

<sup>38</sup> David Knowles, *The Monastic Orders in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 82.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Spurgeon, sermon, “Building the Church,” April 5, 1874.

<sup>40</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible: Philippians and Colossians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 190.

place earlier, but we should be challenged anew by this foundational structure of the church as a network of house churches. We see the following concrete challenges: The church needs face-to-face fellowship. The church dare not bracket out daily life from the life of the church. The church needs structures through which the reality of concrete life can be encouraged. The church must keep in balance the handing out of the word and the handing out of life.”<sup>41</sup>

Many modern homes are too small to hold enough believers to have the strength of a first-century Roman villa-sized house church. In a typical modern Western house church, no one is qualified to serve as an elder. In addition, no one has the free time to consistently devote to in-depth teaching. The reproduction of new house churches will be hindered because of the critical shortage of qualified leaders (the Holy Spirit did not gift enough pastor-teachers for so many sub-biblical micro churches). Lacking both qualified leadership and in-depth teaching, the house church becomes somewhat of a “bless me” club. The fellowship of the *agapé* is marvelous, the worship is wonderful, and the children have a good time playing together. However, no significant discipleship occurs. Outreach is minimal. Thus, it is important to avoid the mistake of thinking *too* small. Even if the home is big enough to host scores of people, the neighbors will not be pleased if the surrounding streets are choked with traffic every Lord’s Day. Many areas have passed zoning ordinances against churches in homes for this reason. This situation is not helped by the fact that house churches are perceived as cultic by many in society. In addition, they are not taken seriously by the typical believer. Maybe worst of all is their tendency to attract an unusually high percentage of “disciples” who are anti-authority and socially dysfunctional, espouse aberrant theologies, or hold secondary issues so dear that they have separated themselves from other believers (factiousness).

In sum, accomplishing what the early church achieved might necessitate *not* meeting in a home. A dynamic equivalent might be more appropriate. Therefore, the emphasis should be on following the general New Testament principle of smaller churches, not simply meeting in homes. For a church to function as effectively as the early church, the size and layout of the building should be carefully considered. Ideally, the building should feel homey. It should be designed to hold a relatively small congregation, and the seating arrangement should be flexible. Because eating together was a major part of early gatherings, the church should have a food preparation area (e.g., sink, long countertop, refrigerator, etc.) and a dining area. To help families with small children, it should have a nursery area and safe indoor and outdoor play areas. There should be ample parking.

To overcome the limitations of modern Western homes, which are smaller than Roman villas, the elders from the various house churches in an area could meet weekly as a sort of presbytery. A mid-week centralized teaching that is open to all house churches could be offered by pastors who are especially gifted in teaching. The house congregations could also meet together in a large, rented facility monthly or quarterly for worship and encouragement.

Many forward thinkers suspect that the Western church is on the path to persecution. For example, biblical teachings against homosexuality will be viewed as hate speech. Christians will be painted by the media as close-minded, right-wing bigots who are on the wrong side of history. The tax-exempt status of churches could be revoked by government legislation when sexual freedom trumps religious liberty (the power to tax is the power to destroy). In times of persecution, meeting in private homes is an attractive option.

**Bi-Vocational Pastors:** Southeastern Baptist Seminary president **Danny Aiken** opined that as the number of Christians recedes in the West, house churches are the wave of the future. He

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<sup>41</sup> Davids and Grossmann, “House.”

further advises seminarians to prepare to be bi-vocational.<sup>42</sup> Bi-vocational ministry was the norm in New Testament times. Jesus' statement that it is more blessed to give than to receive are famous; however, the context is much less known. These words do not appear in any of the four Gospels. They were cited by Paul at a pastor's conference. Paul assumed that most of the pastors would earn their living from regular jobs, just as he did. Thus, they would be the *givers* of silver and gold to the church rather than the recipients: "I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (**Acts 20:33–35**).

Pastors feel a great burden to make disciples. They identify with Jeremiah, who said: "If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot" (**Jer 20:9**). This burden creates the tension expressed by a bi-vocational pastor who wrote: "I leave home at 5:30 a.m. and return at 5:30 p.m. While I see the people around me as an open field for ministry, so much of my time is consumed in commercial activities that I feel like there is something beyond all this that pulls my mind to it perpetually."<sup>43</sup> Perhaps solace can be found in Paul's example. He was God's premier evangelist, church planter, and disciple maker. Yet God, in his sovereignty, felt that making tents was a good use of Paul's time. In His divine wisdom, God also judged that it would be better for Paul to spend much of his time in jail, unable to do the "Lord's work." However, were it not for Paul's time in jail, the church might not have his prison epistles. Our idea and God's idea of the Lord's work might be different. None of us knows the work that God is doing in our lives to prepare us for whatever comes next. Are we in the places that He has called us to serve? If so, what else can we do but continue to be faithful and to remain where we are? Jesus promised to build the church. Let us rest in God's sovereignty.

**Small in a Big Way:** Pastors deeply desire to see their churches grow spiritually and numerically. They want to reach people with the Gospel and to see lives transformed. A small church with the life of Christ that adopts early church practices will likely grow spiritually and numerically. As people's needs are met as they walk closer with Christ, they become excited and cannot help but tell others about Christ and His church. Growing churches love, and loving churches grow.

The temptation will be to allow a small church to grow ever larger. However, beyond a certain size, a church will begin to lose the small-church advantage. Following the practices of the New Testament will become increasingly difficult. The church will become a victim of its own success. The solution is to intentionally keep the church relatively small through the multiplication of small churches, the ongoing training of new leaders, and the deployment of the best people to start new congregations. The goal is dynamic small churches that start other dynamic small churches that start yet other dynamic small churches.

We must celebrate the multiplication of small churches, and gauge success by multiplication rather than addition. Church growth consultant **Bill Easum** suggests: "Success shouldn't be measured solely by our worship attendance. Success must also be measured by how many people we send out and release into ministry."<sup>44</sup> There are 400,000 churches in America with

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<sup>42</sup> Personal conversation with author at Feed My Sheep conference, Atlanta, May 9, 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Email correspondence between author and South African pastor Chad Hutchinson.

<sup>44</sup> Bill Easum, "Ripples of Multiplication," [m.exponential.org](http://m.exponential.org), accessed August 31, 2016.

an average size of 100.<sup>45</sup> If only ten percent start a new church in the next five years, that would be 40,000 new churches. Now, this is something to get excited about!

Smaller churches have strategic, divinely-designed size advantages for effective ministry: closeness, intimacy, refreshing simplicity, ease of multiplication, one-another ministry, face-to-face fellowship, the Lord's Supper as an *agapé* meal, less bureaucracy, less management headache, church discipline, meaningful participatory worship, and in achieving consensus. After all: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose ... even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1Co 1:27-2).

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What is the evidence that persecution was not the only reason the early church met in homes?
2. Some argue that Roman villa-sized churches were characteristic of the church in its infancy. It was right and natural, they argue, for each church to mature beyond the confines of a home and to build ever larger meeting places. How do you feel about this?
3. Were smaller congregations merely an incidental fact of history, or were they a purposeful part of the blueprint for effective church ministry? Why?
4. Why might the apostles have laid down a purposeful pattern of small churches?
5. What are the practical advantages and disadvantages of meeting in a home?
6. What might be the psychological effects of the size of a congregation on a church meeting and on those in attendance?
7. How would the number of people involved affect a church's ability to have a participatory meeting or to achieve congregational consensus?
8. What advantages for growth and reproduction might house churches have over fellowships that have to build church houses?
9. What should be done in a situation in which a home is too small to host a church meeting?
10. How did New Testament churches grow numerically yet continue to meet in private homes?

*NTRF.org has audio, video, and a teacher's discussion guide on small church theology.*

*Revised 02/24/21*

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<sup>45</sup> Bob Roberts, "Multiplication Essentials," [m.exponential.org](http://m.exponential.org), accessed August 31, 2016.