

Remantling the Church

One Way Out: House Churches or Gatherings

Before we finish our thesis here on Pharisaism in the modern Church, we thought it might be a good idea to give a little input on what *to* do, not just want *not* to do in the way of church.

After decades of exposure to the various options for “doing church” in the West, including denominational churches (Catholic, Lutheran, Wesleyan, Assemblies of God, Calvary Chapel and others), non-denominational community churches, seeker-sensitive churches and two different house churches, we can definitely give the thumbs-up to house churches. Why? Here are a few of the distinctive benefits:

PROS

1. House churches permit the active participation of all the members in the life of the Body, ala 1 Cor. 14. Starting songs, sharing testimonies, confessing sin, facilitating prayer or offering prayer requests, processing trauma, doing warfare, prophesying, sharing insights, leading communion, exhorting, all can be done by various individuals at various times. Teaching or shepherding is more often incarnational, relational and experiential, rather than didactic, because it’s done by the Holy Spirit. There is one Body, but many members, all operating in their gifting and being used to produce the symphony of faith that God intended churches to experience.
2. Houses churches are generally small enough that individuals can be genuinely and intimately known by one another, and love of the brethren can be more than a nice idea or sentiment. We learn to bear one another’s burdens, counsel one another, hold one another accountable, and enjoy real fellowship.
3. House churches generally encourage transparency, vulnerability, and honesty. It’s hard to be fake or wear a mask in that small of a group. The goal is grace and truth, safety and authenticity.
4. It can be easier for a less vocal or shy person to share or participate in a small setting than in larger gatherings.
5. Leadership, eldership, or mentorship can be effective without the creation of a clergy class or paid staff. Elders and deacons can be formally designated or not. People usually

know who is qualified to lead.

6. Small children and toddlers can participate and learn Body life at an early age. My own granddaughter started a song just shy of her second birthday. (“I have decided to follow Jesus...”) I’ve seen children who can barely talk lay hands on an adult and pray for them. And the person actually got healed!
7. House churches don’t require worship leaders, but can benefit from those who are sensitive to the Spirit’s leading in worship, or those who are musically gifted.
8. They don’t require instruments, but can benefit from them, including strictly rhythm instruments that anyone can wield. Members may prefer acapella worship and some do.
9. House church gatherings can be planned or spontaneous, regular or irregular.
10. They come in a variety of shapes, sizes and configurations. There are no requirements, so they can be as small as two or three people and as large as a house or other location will hold. Some say 12-15 is ideal. Others like them bigger, some smaller.
11. The participants can represent a good mix of life stages and situations or they can be mostly singles, mostly couples with small children, mostly couples without children, couples with grown children, young adults, or retirees depending on how God brings the group together.
12. Meetings can be as structured or unstructured as the participants desire, and as long or short as the group chooses.
13. They can be centered around a free-flowing bible study, discussion, worship or prayer, personal sharing, or may focus more on listening to the Spirit and going where He leads each week. In this way they generally combine all the elements, but maybe not all of them each week.
14. They can be entirely unplanned as far as order of elements and ending time, or they can have a set schedule or order (though we don’t really recommend this since the Spirit blows where it will and you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going).
15. They can meet on the same day each week or change each week, or even meet more or less than once a week.

16. The house church can meet in the same home each week (if they meet weekly) or move from house to house when desired or necessary.
17. Meetings can look somewhat like church services or more like fellowship activities. People can just get together, hike, talk, eat, discuss what they're learning about God, sing, whatever.
18. They can and often do include a community meal. Or the meal portion can be limited to once a month or any other schedule that works for the participants.
19. Meals can be potluck each time or assigned. They can be prepared in advance and brought to the meeting, or cooked on-site. They can be take-out (pizza, Chinese) or deli fare.
20. Communion can be as often or as seldom as people want: annually to coincide with Passover, weekly, monthly, or randomly.
21. Since house churches don't require salaries and have no mandatory overhead, what limited expenses might arise (napkins, paper plates) can be shared or donated.
22. Thus contributions can be used almost entirely for benevolence or evangelistic or missional outreach purposes.
23. Decisions can be made corporately in most cases.

There are more Pros, but you get the idea. Flexibility, transparency, authenticity, love, mercy, rich fellowship, personal growth, equality, participation, Spirit-led worship, even miracles. There is no substitute for the life of shared faith and no imitation even approximates its benefits.

CONS

1. House churches can, in time, become like families. Everyone knows everyone else quite well and there can be personality conflicts, annoying habits, and challenging interpersonal negotiations. This is to be expected because there is not the buffer of pews, numbers and anonymity to keep people apart and to keep real relationship from

happening. Because of the level of intimacy, things can at times become intense or difficult.

2. Because they are generally small, there can be fewer seasoned saints to “bring up” the babes. There are also fewer healthy individuals to bear the unwieldy burdens of the less healthy or more needy.
3. The need for the participants to learn to love each other is greater, because in order for the church to endure, real love must be born, nurtured and protected.
4. Real participation is required for the body to function as intended. This is actually a pro also.
5. Young children can be difficult to negotiate if there is not a plan for their engagement or a separate room for crying babies or disruptive toddlers.
6. Someone needs to be willing to host each meeting.
7. Folding chairs and tables are usually needed to accommodate the additional houseguests.
8. Neighbors can get annoyed if their desires (re: parking, noise, etc.) are not met.
9. They can become just like big church, except small, especially if Pharisee-like leaders are allowed to take over.
10. You can from time to time have individuals who dominate the meetings or wish to “take over” and it takes a cohesive and mature body and strong elders to avert or overcome this.

Our experience with house churches has been almost entirely positive, though they are not without challenges. The availability of house churches is a little scarce yet and they may be hard to find in your area, but they are not that difficult to start or to manage if you can't find one. If you do not set yourself up as the all-knowing guru or take on the traditional practices of a titled and paid pastor/teacher/head-honcho, you will save yourself a lot of grief and compromise. Just do your part and allow others to do theirs as God calls and leads them. If all the members are treated as equals, then no one should feel overburdened with their role or compelled to lord it

over the others. God teaches primarily incarnationally and experientially within the context of relationship, both with Himself and with the brethren. If your gifting, character and spiritual maturity qualify you for eldership, then exercise it with humility, grace, and deference to the Spirit, knowing that your job is to model that maturity and administer discipline with other godly brothers when necessary for the integrity and preservation of the Body in love.

Do your best not to allow the meeting to turn into a small version of big church. Formal preaching and teaching, rigid time schedules, rituals, and domination by one or two members are a sign that you are moving in the wrong direction and will quench the Spirit. Allowing the Spirit to move as He wills can be a difficult skill for some to learn and they will have a tendency to take over with structured teaching or other anxiety-reducing efforts. Encourage them to trust God and reconfirm the fact that the Spirit blows where it will and though the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet, the Holy Spirit is not under our control. He will, however, not bully His way into a meeting, but will wait upon our readiness to yield to Him in truth.

Here are some books you may want to consider reading (although it's not rocket science):

Radical Renewal: <i>The Problem of Wineskins Today</i>	Howard A. Snyder
Church without Walls: <i>Moving Beyond Traditional Boundaries</i>	Jim Petersen
Simply Church	Tony and Felicity Dale
Pagan Christianity: <i>The Origins of Our Modern Church Practices</i>	Frank Viola
The Open Church: <i>How to Bring Back the Exciting Life of the First Century Church</i>	James H. Rutz
Going to the Root: <i>Proposals for Radical Church Renewal</i>	Christian Smith
Houses that Change the World: <i>The Return of the House Churches</i>	Wolfgang Simson
So You Don't Want to Go to Church Anymore? <i>An unexpected journey into the reality of the father's family</i>	Jake Colsen