

The Mega Church and the Church in the Home

Bryn Jones

People were converted and baptised into the early church with the conviction that they and their whole household would be saved. [Acts 16:31; 18:8] These Christian families were the primary centres of God's life and faith amongst men, and frequently formed the nucleus of what could be called 'church in the home'. [Ro 16:5; 1Co 16:19; Phm 1:2]

Throughout the last two millenniums the church has evolved from its simple beginnings of extended families gathered in the home to highly complex systems and networks of Christian congregations around the world, many of which can only be described as 'mega churches'. In Latin America and Africa some exceed of 70,000 members, and increasingly in the USA many churches now number between 10 and 20 thousand, with a congregation in Seoul, Korea reaching as many as half a million. The trend is away from the small neighbourhood church to large church congregations, often conveniently located on major highways or thoroughfares. Proponents of this trend cite the following benefits:

- The larger size has greater impact and influence throughout the community.
- One is able to draw together a highly trained professional staff that can 'run the church' or 'handle' the meetings, deal with the tax authorities or banks, etc., which is not always the case with smaller churches.
- Burgeoning finances enable one to do so much more in mission around the world.
- The mega-sized cities of our generation - with many now numbering 10-20 million (and some even larger) - require large-scale testimony.

Restorers also believe that God intends dynamic churches with sufficient numbers, ability, gift, and finances, to meet the challenges of the deepening darkness of the end times. However, restorers also assert that we must face the fact that generally no more than 15% of a church of a 100 - and as low as 10% in a church of 1000 - are *actively* engaged in the ministry and meetings on a regular basis. That means that somewhere between 85% and 90% of the people in most churches are merely congregational attendees!! This highlights the paradigm shift between the early church and that of the 20th century. The early church was comprised of a highly

mobile, highly motivated people *outward-bound* in mission to reach the ends of the earth. The church of the 20th century has increasingly become a static, *building-bound* congregation sharing a few hours of common time each week and serviced by a small core of people who 'run' the meetings and church programmes.

Although the earliest Christian meetings were initially inside the Temple and its courtyards, more intimate gatherings of the church quickly spread into private homes. [Acts 2:46; 12:12] The home proved to be the most conducive place to meet, especially in the cities of the Diaspora. At Corinth, Aquila and Priscilla had the church in their home; later, Paul fellowshipped and ministered in the home of Titius Justus, next door to the Jewish synagogue. [Acts 18:7] The larger homes of wealthier individuals often became the place where a number of smaller family home groups would gather together to share fellowship. [Ro 16:23; 1Co 14:23]

For the early church, there were definite advantages to meeting in a home:

- **The privacy of the setting**, especially where meeting as Christians was against the law.
- **Christians could pursue their exercise of the charismata** (gifts of the Spirit) and break bread without being misunderstood or judged by the uninitiated public.
- **The costs** of such meetings were minimal.
- **It was easy to network** the community of believers across the city and region via church in the home, which made it so much more conducive for fellowship and friendship throughout the day.
- **Intimacy and friendship were cultivated** and as a consequence each member of the church felt secure to participate in the gatherings.
- **Each Christian could develop** in their contribution of gift in the meeting.

From the beginning, the early church was surrounded by a hostile religious and political world incensed by the fact that the controversial troublemaker Jesus could not be disposed of. His resurrection was proclaimed everywhere, and the absence of a body to confirm his death - together with hundreds of witnesses as to his living presence - left both Jewish religious leaders and Roman officials in great difficulty.

Despite the open hostility, the early Christians - empowered by God's Holy Spirit - gave themselves zealously to the proclamation of the good news of God's love, power, salvation and kingdom. Since the world around them was not neutral, it was impossible for anyone joining them to be neutral towards the world. To embrace Christ and become part of his extended family was to take up a cross daily to follow him. The fact that the churches in the home were illicit communities - and that it was a capital offence to be a Christian - did not stop God's people from multiplying and growing as the family of God across the nations.

At the helm of this advance were the apostles and prophets. Apostolic teams emerged with a breadth and diversity of gift strengths. They ensured that networking churches were established on a firm foundation of Christ. This meant not simply teaching doctrine, but daily living (walking) in the life they had found in Christ. The apostles knew that *no foundation is truly laid in a Christian community until it becomes the authentic practised lifestyle of the members of that community.*

In today's world of 6 billion people, the majority will soon be in mega-cities. There is place for the large mega-church witness, but these should integrate hundreds - if not thousands - of expressions of church in the homes. The two expressions should not be in competition; they both have their place in revealing 'the manifold wisdom of God'. [Eph 3:10]

Streets to Live in

The natural tendency of the human mind is to imprison itself inside thought tramlines. We must not confine God's purpose to being outworked in mega-church or house-church situations. Look at Isaiah's prophecy of God's intention to restore 'paths' or 'streets' to live in. Western society in its inordinate desire for privatism, seeks to live in the detached houses of present times rather than in close community life of previous generations.

My childhood and up-bringing was in a terrace house (town house) in a street with 42 houses on one side and 40 on the other. In this context with the close proximity of life you discovered a largeness to your family beyond the few that lived in your house; the extended family included deep relationships with many others in the street. There was a mutual concern and regard for the welfare of each other; each family was its neighbour's keeper. Life tended to be one of shared experience even to the passing on of packages of clothes from one family to another as they were outgrown by the children. Excitement and happenings in one home would be shared with the street; often in celebration there were street parties much as today in some areas you have street carnivals. Equally, where grief came to a home it could not come to one alone but came to the many. Children who were aspiring in education for better things were not simply encouraged by father and mother, but by many other uncles, aunts and friends in the street. In time of need no one was alone, the street in which you lived was a living community of which you were part. Isaiah's prophecy of the end times is that the church in all its growth will rediscover this sense of intimacy of life together. In this sense what Jesus spoke of as being **his experience** of nakedness, hunger, the aloneness of prisons, etc., was the consequence of the way the least of his people was treated, and supports Isaiah's prophecy of the community of God.