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A Glimpse into the Missional House Churches of America

J. D. Payne¹

Discussions of house churches in western contexts have been increasing over the last decade. Though one can speculate as to the reason for the interest and growth in this particular expression of the Body of Christ, few have attempted to study the present realities. For some time I heard of these simple expressions of the Church in countries throughout the world, but wondered if there were such churches in the United States that were evangelistic and involved in church planting. I wanted to know if there were more to house churches than the stereotypical small group of disgruntled believers huddling around their kitchen tables each Sunday complaining about the maladies of the established church, while being thankful that “their” church is not like “those churches.”

My study that was recently published in *Missional House Churches: Reaching Our Communities with the Gospel* (Paternoster), is one of few studies of American house churches and the only study to date addressing such churches that are experiencing baptisms and planting churches. This article is a summary of some of the significant findings of the study of the thirty-three U. S. house churches scattered across this country.

How Were These Churches Selected?

Since I was working with a budget of \$0, my research method had to be lean. Locating house churches is not always an easy task. Though there are a few web based search engines, many house churches choose not to register with such databases. There is no central organization that oversees the number of house churches in North America, and since many are non-denominational, denominational headquarters can offer virtually no information on the number of house churches. Through my

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connections with a couple of individuals who have a substantial amount of contacts with house church leaders, my web-based survey was distributed to several hundred church leaders. Two hundred and fifty-five leaders responded to this initial contact.

Since I did not wish to study any particular house church, but rather those churches that were *both* baptizing and planting churches, two research parameters were established. First, I wanted to know what churches had baptized at least one person in the previous year. Second, I wanted to know what churches had planted at least one church in the previous three years. Of the 255 survey participants, ninety-one churches met both criteria. Of these ninety-one church leaders, my research team and I were able to contact and interview thirty-three of these leaders.

Locations of the Churches

These churches were located in seventeen states. The churches were located in every region of the country. Their locations were not limited by population density. The churches were located in rural, urban, and suburban contexts. They could be found in both small and large towns as well as in medium-sized cities and inner cities.

Predominately Anglo, But Much Ethnic Diversity

Though I assumed the majority of the churches would be predominately Anglo in their ethnic composition, the amount of ethnic diversity represented in the churches surprised me. Less than one-third of the leaders surveyed noted that their congregations were 100 percent Caucasian. The majority of the churches were ethnically diverse.

Mostly New Churches

Almost 80 percent of the churches in my study had been meeting together for less than ten years. Twenty-one percent of the churches were at least ten years old. Of the thirty-three churches, many were recently planted (under six years of age). Forty-six percent of the churches had been meeting together for one to three years at the time of our study. Thirty percent had been meeting for four to six years. Two churches in the study had been meeting for ten to twelve years, while only one church had been meeting for less than one year. Five churches had been meeting for thirteen or more years.

Sizes of the Churches

Though not all house churches are small, usually their sizes are much smaller than most traditional American churches.

When asked, "When your individual house church gathers for worship and fellowship, what is usually the size of the church present?" the average range of the churches represented in my study was between fourteen to seventeen people. There was one church in the study that was larger than thirty-four people, and three churches averaged six to nine people.

High View of the Scriptures

Ninety-seven percent of those who participated in the study clearly showed a great respect for and a conservative theological perspective of the trustworthiness of the Bible. All the leaders, except for one, either agreed or strongly agreed that "the Bible is the Word of God without any error." During phone interviews, it was not unusual to hear these leaders state, "The Bible says . . ." to support the practices of their churches.

You Must Be Born Again!

Given that almost all of these leaders had a very high view of the Scriptures, it was no surprise that they clearly supported an evangelical understanding of salvation. When asked, "Please describe in some detail what your church believes must take place for a person to be born again," leaders' responses contained phrases such as:

- Repentance and faith in Christ
- Romans 10:9–10
- Confess with your mouth; believe in your heart
- Surrender and commitment to Christ
- Repent of a sinful lifestyle; accept Christ as personal Savior and Lord
- Recognition of sin, asking forgiveness, making Him Lord
- Allegiance to Jesus as Lord
- Regeneration by the Holy Spirit; gift of God for saving faith

Membership

Though I have no percentages, some house church leaders have discarded the notion of a church roll or membership roster, believing that membership is based more on intimate relationships and gift use. My research team and I quickly noticed the difficulty in asking questions about membership requirements.

The survey tool was written with a common understanding of membership in mind, whereby the believer joins a local church and has his or her name added to the church's membership list. When asked, "Are there any requirements/expectations

(e.g., attending a new members' class, signing a covenant) for being a member of your house church?" thirteen of the leaders (39 percent) noted that their churches did have requirements for membership. On the other hand, twenty leaders (61 percent) had no requirements/expectations for membership. Because of the wording of the survey, I believe more of these latter leaders did indeed have certain requirements/expectations in place. For example, when asked about assimilation, leaders with no membership requirements offered many of the same responses as leaders in churches with requirements/expectations. For the 39 percent, however, follow-up questions were asked about their requirements/expectations. Several responded with "baptism," "membership class," "participation," involvement in "discipling groups," or commitment to "life transformation groups."

Survey Participants

For the most part, the leaders who participated in this study were highly educated. Twenty-five of the thirty-three leaders surveyed (76 percent) had a college degree level of education or higher, with the average level of education consisting of some graduate studies. My team noted that some of these leaders were alumni to Northwest Graduate School, Fuller Theological Seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Asbury Theological Seminary, Concordia Seminary, Denver Seminary, Grace Theological Seminary, and Talbot Theological Seminary. Of the leaders surveyed, four had doctoral degrees and two had completed some doctoral studies.

Structure and Organization

I still find children's kaleidoscopes fascinating. By twisting the simple toy, the viewer creates a multitude of colorful patterns. This device uses colored bits of material, mirrors, and light to create images that are highly diverse and unique. The churches in this study were structured and organized in a variety of ways. Like the images seen in a kaleidoscope, we can expect diversity in these expressions of church life. In fact, if there are common structural threads that connect most house churches, it is the fact that they strive to be very low in structure and organization with a decentralized leadership, and they place a high degree of emphasis on community. In an attempt to better understand these missional house churches, I have identified at least three different ways house churches in general tend to organize themselves. It should be noted that, in some cases, these types are not mutually exclusive, with some churches falling into more than one category.

Isolationists (Independent)

The first way that some churches organize themselves is through isolation. These churches believe they should have no accountability with other churches—they are an island unto themselves and have no desire to minister with other local expressions of the body of Christ. Though many opponents of house churches tend to stereotype all such churches as isolationists, my hope is that this type of church is the exception rather than the norm. None of the missional house churches fell into this category.

Networkers (Interdependent)

The networker churches see themselves as independent (autonomous), but they understand the biblical example, importance, and wisdom in networking with other churches. For these congregations, they choose to be *interdependent*, working with other autonomous congregations for missionary work, benevolence, leadership training, accountability, and fellowship.

Though these congregations are self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating, self-teaching, and self-expressing, they realize that there is biblical support for interdependence and the ability to accomplish more for the kingdom while working together as opposed to being isolationists. Many of these networks were local; that is, the churches were close geographically. On the other hand, some of the networks were regional, national, and even international in scope.

Twenty-five of the churches in the study (76 percent) were affiliated with a network of house churches. Most of these networks consisted of two to fourteen churches. Thirty-six percent (twelve churches) were affiliated with networks consisting of three to five congregations. Some of the networks had no official name, but many did.

Denominationalists

With the penchant for low organization and structure and a decentralized base of authority common among many house churches, it should be of no surprise that most house churches were not affiliated with denominations. Though in this study this situation was clearly the case, there were five churches that identified themselves with four denominations: Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, Grace Brethren, and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Church Growth and Missional House Churches

For some time I had heard people assume that house churches were inwardly focused. "We four and no more!" some would sarcastically say, expressing what they believed to be a common mantra among house churches. I wanted to know, however, who was reaching people and seeing expansion growth. Since there are thousands of churches in America who will not experience any baptisms in any given year, I intentionally set the standards very low, looking for house churches that had experienced at least one baptism in the year prior to our study.

Baptisms

Of the 255 churches that participated in our online survey, 146 churches experienced at least one baptism in the previous year. The thirty-three churches that made it into our study (having experienced both baptisms and church planting) had *an average of four to six baptisms per church* in the previous year.

I also wanted to know the evangelistic effectiveness of the churches in the study. My assumption was that most house churches are small, and, if they are experiencing baptisms, they should have a low ratio membership to baptismal ratio. To my knowledge, this was the first study to apply the baptismal ratio to house churches to address evangelistic effectiveness.

The average size of the churches represented in the study was between fourteen and seventeen people with the average range of baptisms being between four and six per year. In this study, the membership/attendance to baptism ratio of the house churches ranged from 3.5:1 to 2.8:1. At the high end of the range, these churches were baptizing one person per year for every 3.5 members/attendees. At the low end of the range, for every 2.8 members/attendees, one baptism was witnessed. The gravity of these numbers should not be passed over casually. Ratios of this size automatically place these churches among the lowest baptismal ratios in the world. Any traditional congregations manifesting such numbers would automatically be considered the most effective evangelistic churches in North America.

New Believers Percentage

These congregations had not only outstanding baptismal ratios but they also had outstanding percentages of conversion growth occurring. In the thirty-three churches in our study, the average percentage range of new believers in each congregation was between 29 percent and 35 percent. Again, this is a high percentage of new believers in a single congregation.

Though these were young churches, just over half had been meeting for four years or more. Generally, newer American churches have lower baptismal ratios and higher percentages of new believers present than older churches. My research supports this general assumption.

As traditional churches age, usually baptismal ratios increase and the overall percentage of recent converts decreases. But is this also the case in house churches? More research is needed to determine the answer to this question. My initial response is that most house churches will experience the same long-term effects as those experienced by traditional churches, but my data also revealed this situation is not always the case among missional house churches. The six churches in the study that had been meeting as house churches for ten or more years, reported very low baptismal ratios. The overall ratios ranged from 1.4:1 to 14:1, still some of the best ratios in America by any missiologist's standard.

Church Plants

In America today, the most urgently needed types of church growth are extension and bridging growth. Of the 255 churches that took the online survey, 123 had planted at least one church within the past three years. Again, assuming that most missional house churches would be new churches *and* that few traditional churches are currently involved in church planting, I set the research parameter low, asking for the number of plants within the past three years.

My team asked the church leaders, "In the past three years, how many churches has your church planted (started)?" This question could be answered by all thirty-three leaders, regardless of the congregations' ages. Twenty-one of the churches (64 percent) planted an average of one to three churches; three churches (9 percent) each planted an average of ten or more churches.

The average number of churches planted by each congregation was surprising. Each of the thirty-three churches planted an average of four to six new churches. This average represents more than one church plant per church every year for the past three years. Over three years, these churches planted approximately 132 to 198 churches. *These numbers alone place such congregations in the highest category of churches planting churches in North America.*

Though I am excited about these initial findings, future research needs to be done to confirm if the churches being planted are by biblical definition actual churches. Until then, I remain

hopeful and encouraged by the results of the study.

Simple Methods of Evangelism

From this study, one thing is clear about missional house churches: their evangelistic methods are simple in nature. To my knowledge, none of the churches in the study had highly sophisticated evangelism programs or activities. In fact, we never heard the word “program” used in our research. Aside from one church leader mentioning that his church taught an Alpha Course, no other survey participant mentioned any commonly used evangelism tool (e.g., *Evangelism Explosion*, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*). Phrases such as “relational evangelism,” “personal evangelism,” “oikos evangelism,” and “friendship evangelism” communicated what these churches were doing to spread the gospel. The majority of these churches reached people with the gospel primarily through the relationships that God had allowed to develop between church members and those who were unbelievers.

The initial survey asked, “If your church has experienced baptisms within the past year, what means/methods did you use to reach those people from the harvest?” My desire was to offer an open-ended question rather than give a predetermined list of categories from which respondents could select their answers. I wanted to know if a common methodological thread ran through the evangelistic work of these house churches. Did these churches use similar methods to reach those in their communities?

If so, what approaches did they use? According to the churches in the study, the primary means by which these churches believed the Lord worked to bring unbelievers to faith was through the “use of relationships” (67 percent). Only six percent said “invitation to church activities” as the primary means.

I was surprised that 67 percent of the leaders surveyed attributed personal relationships as the primary means by which their churches were reaching people with the gospel. By far, this approach dwarfed the other approaches listed. I am always concerned when I ask someone about evangelism and they respond with, “Well, I practice lifestyle witnessing,” or “Relational evangelism is what our church does.” Usually, these answers mean that the person or church attempts to live a good life before unbelievers hoping that either one day an unbeliever will ask about Jesus or that “letting our lights shine” will automatically bring others to faith. Usually, these answers reveal that evangelism is not taking place. The New Testament clearly teaches that though

a godly lifestyle is absolutely necessary, a verbal proclamation of the gospel is necessary as well (Romans 10:17). The church cannot substitute good deeds for right words and still call it evangelism; both are necessary.

Though these churches were not opposed to unbelievers being invited to various church events and gatherings, I did get the impression that they did not see the corporate worship gathering as the primary place when evangelism should occur. One such leader told us that their church places no emphasis on a “come and see” approach to evangelism but rather expects all of the members to “go and tell.” Another leader stated, “We encourage that our witnessing be ‘as you go’ in the local market place to the ends of the earth.” These churches emphasized the need for their members to meet unbelievers in their contexts rather than attempting to bring them to a church event. One church saw people coming to faith through “individual disciples reaching out to those they work with or people they meet in the community.” Another leader shared that “people within the church reached out to those within their areas of influence—school, work, and so on, and that is how those people were reached.”

Sometimes, relational evangelism is accompanied by helping meet peoples’ needs. For example, a church leader from Ohio stated, “We simply enter into people’s lives. For example, someone in one of our churches knew a lady who just had a baby and was having a difficult time. We began taking meals to her and then started cleaning her messy house. Three months later, she was baptized.”

Other times, relational evangelism was tightly connected with family members rather than friends and acquaintances. For example, one leader noted that the parents in their congregations intentionally shared the gospel with their children. He commented, “All of the baptisms in the past year were children of families who had disciplined them.”

Methods of Assimilation

In follow-up surveys, my team asked church leaders, “How does your church know when a believer has a sense of belonging and is thus involved in the life and ministry of the church?” Though it was no surprise that most of these churches had no formal assimilation process (only one church had a covenant class for new believers), the fact that 70 percent of the churches stated that their understanding of assimilation was “relational” also should not have been a surprise. Other responses included observable lifestyle changes, repentance and baptism, and a desire to remain with the church even during difficult times.

When we asked church leaders about assimilation, twenty-three of the respondents said their churches knew that a new believer was connected and involved with the church when they witnessed regular “participation,” “gift use,” and “service.” Many times “attendance” was listed in connection with “participation.”

For many of these churches the concept of a standardized and formalized membership orientation and accountability system was a foreign, impersonal, and an undesired concept. This matter is not surprising since these churches understand themselves to exist as families. They operate more through their relationships with one another rather than through established written policy.

Though I prefer a relational approach to assimilation, I know from experience that this type of accountability and intimacy requires a level of intentionality that is beyond what is required for just attending church gatherings and taking headcounts. Though my research did not probe deeper into the specific practices of these churches, particularly asking if their assimilation processes worked well, it would have been worthy of study.

The evidence from my study suggests that the highly relational dynamics of these missional house churches contain the necessary components for effective assimilation. Most house churches, by their very nature, are small groups. Thom S. Rainer, in his book *High Expectations*, noted that traditional churches that immediately assimilate new believers into their Sunday schools are five times more likely to see those people remain with the church five years later than churches that reach people with the gospel but fail to incorporate them into Sunday school classes.² In another study, Rainer noted that “though the methodologies were many, we found that the most effective assimilation took place where churches were developing disciples through three key foundational elements: expectations, relationships, and involvement.”³

The majority of the missional house churches in the study that used relationships as their primary means of assimilation were positioned both relationally and structurally to manifest all three characteristics that Rainer observed from his traditional church research. It is easy for house churches to be high-expectation churches since they are so relational. Because house church congregants are connected by a common fellowship rather than an event or place, involvement, accountability, and relationships are natural to their existence. As life is lived together, no one can be an anonymous or uninvolved/inactive church member for very long before someone asks, “What’s

wrong?" This expression of the body of Christ also offers a high level of accountability to remain faithful to Christ. And of course, it is practically impossible to be a part of a house church and not have several relationships.

Conclusion

Though my research addresses many aspects of missional house churches, additional research is greatly needed. In fact, part of the reason for studying such churches was so I could serve as a provocateur and raise additional questions that would hopefully lead others to additional studies of missional house churches. Though house churches are not the answer to all the problems facing the traditional American church, there are many characteristics of missional house churches from which we can learn as we seek to engage Americans with the good news of our Lord.

Portions of this article were taken from J. D. Payne, *Missional House Churches: Reaching Our Communities with the Gospel* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster Publishing, 2007).

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Notes

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2. Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 45.

3. Thom S. Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches: Successful Church*

Reveal What Works and What Doesn't (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 173.