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Simple Church Ecclesiology in Relationship to the Evangelical Church Denomination

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**SIMPLE CHURCH ECCLESIOLOGY IN RELATIONSHIP TO
THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH DENOMINATION**

LEROY V. ROBINSON

**A DOCTORAL PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY
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DISSERTATION ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE


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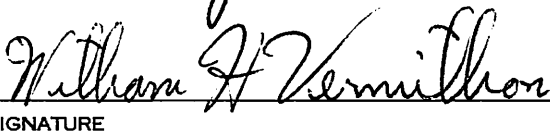
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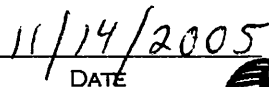
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EVANGELICAL CHURCH DENOMINATION**

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Acknowledgements and Dedication

This project was completed with the help of a number of people to whom I am deeply indebted. To some of the greatest gifts this side of heaven, my children Andrea, James, Jason, and Joy and their spouses Jason, Karen, Charlet, and Matthew; thank you for your love and encouragements. To BarBara Madsen, our friend, whose generosity and heart of love has provided a place Linda and I call home, a true sanctuary in an extremely chaotic world, a setting that daily reminds us of God's goodness. To the people of Epic Wineskins, whose bravery and faith have deepened my own passion to be a Christ-follower. Their support and willingness to experiment has provided much of the inspiration for this project.

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ABSTRACT

The issue addressed in this paper regards the validity of a more organic ecclesiology in the context of The Evangelical Church. The validation for this paradigm is its ability to embody authentic Christian community and in the process develop disciples who are able to administrate the mandates of the Great Commission. The result will be three-fold: leadership development, church planting, and engagement of the emerging culture.

The purpose of this paper is to offer an ecclesiological paradigm advantageous to the entire Church community. This model is one of several the Holy Spirit has chosen to use in blessing and emboldening the emerging church. The cultural transition from modernity to post-modernity requires that the Church give careful consideration to forms and structures in its endeavors to accomplish its missional responsibilities. This involves looking for insight and wisdom in a paradigmatic examination of the Church.

In practice, Simple Church is *more* organic than other church paradigms now prominent on the North American landscape. This church expression is described using ecological terms and language, because it's nature is organic, and natural. This paper asserts that effective community life and ministry are incarnational, relational, and missional and effective leadership forms are non-hierarchical and apostolic.

The desire of this paper is to present a holistic church structure and form that is fluid, simple, participatory, and easily replicated. Simple Church is the paradigm proposed specifically for The Evangelical Church in its quest to become a church planting movement.

Chapter 1 — INTRODUCTION

How we plant churches is in many ways determined by the location and focus group (where and among whom we plant churches). Moreover, within a rapidly changing world, not all church plants will look the same. As a result, different models to reach the needs of this new culture are emerging.¹



Contextual Factors

The Evangelical Church is a group of people who are proud of their holiness roots and passionate about evangelism. Since its inception in 1968, there have been times of wonderful refreshing, renewal, and revival as people met Christ and congregations were birthed. In its first 30 years, an average of one congregation per year has been planted or added. Church planting has been important, but not always an intentional part of ministry. Like other segments of the Church in North America, Evangelical Churches are experiencing marginal growth, and in some cases congregations are in decline. In 1996, an intentional effort was begun as leaders across the denomination realized the need to be better equipped and educated in the areas of church planting.

¹ Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 136.

Demographics

In 1998 at their General Conference, The Evangelical Church determined to make church planting a major ministry goal for the next 10 to 20 years. The results are as follows.

- Twenty-one churches have been added or planted.
- Over 350 leaders receiving some form of training in the area of church planting, church multiplication and healthy church concepts.
- 110 leaders have been trained at Assessment Clinics and Church Planting orientation workshop.
- 60 leaders have gone through a Boot Camp or similar training experience at least once.
- And all six Conferences have sponsored Church Planting/Health training events.²

Leaders in The Evangelical Church are demonstrating resoluteness in addressing these issues that impinge on their future as the following illustrations suggest.

Illustration One: General Superintendent Dr. William Vermillion of the Evangelical Church — Annual Report — 2004

In July 2004, the General Superintendent and Conference Superintendent presented their reports at *The Thirty-Seventh Annual Business Session of the Pacific Conference*, July 2004. Excerpts from their reports are pertinent to the problem statement and the thesis of this document.

In his report, the General Superintendent reiterated the denomination's mission and values. Here is an excerpt:

Mission: The Evangelical Church's mission is a God-birther passion to bring people into a vital relationship with Jesus, to provide the un-churched with a healthy church family, to disciple believers and to build a network of life giving churches as we honor the past and embrace the future. We will accomplish our mission by praying, living Spirit-filled lives, evangelizing, discipling and building

² Tim Roehl, "Evangelical Church Health/Planting Update," *The Evangelical Church*, Fall (2004). <http://www.theevangelicalchurch.org/harvest/index.htm> (accessed November 15, 2004).

healthy life-giving churches by intentionally developing a system of assessing and coaching. Simply put we are “harvest focused, holiness fueled.”

We value people:

1. We believe God commands us to engage the harvest by bringing people into a vital relationship with Jesus: therefore we have set a goal of 30,000 people coming to Jesus by November 2008 through the ministry of the people of The Evangelical Church
2. We believe God commands us to provide a healthy church family for these new believers as well as for the un-churched, therefore we will promote the planting of new churches with a goal of 100 new churches by June 2010; we will promote the revitalizing and renewal of existing churches, using assessments, with a goal of 67 churches assessed by November 2008, and we will promote doing restarts.³

**Illustration Two: Superintendent of the Pacific Conference of the Evangelical Church,
Rev. Victor Slaughter — Annual Report — 2004**

The Superintendent’s theme of his report was “defining moments.” The following excerpts are issues I will address in this paper. They are as follows:

The conference needs capable, quality leaders for the “twenty-somethings” who are leaving organized church following high school and college. More visionary leaders are needed to reach and enable this new generation of young people. This means new approaches and methods in new beginnings.⁴

Do we really believe that God, through the work of Christ Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, can effectively transform sinful and broken lives? If so, we must define the means and ministry models that will engage our culture with the Word of God and the power of Christ in broken human relations. We can’t survive as His Church with our “spiritual heads and hearts” buried in the sand. We must be attuned to God’s approach in reaching those around us as John Wesley did in his day.⁵

³ Pacific Conference of the Evangelical Church, *The Thirty-Seventh Annual Business Session: The Official Record 2004* (Milwaukie, OR: Pacific Conference, 2004), 87.

⁴ Ibid., 89-90.

⁵ Ibid., 90.

The challenge for Christians, clergy, and lay persons in the current culture is to live a godly lifestyle, building wholesome relationships with individuals who are searching for spiritual and moral absolutes and stability in this life and for the future. To do this we must have clear, intentional systems and paradigms to reach the unbelievers in our community.⁶

Illustration Three: Dreamscape Workshop

In October of 2004, Tom Clegg of Church Resource Ministries was invited by leaders of The Evangelical Church to guide them through a Dreamscape, an exercise in determining where they've been, where they are currently, and where they need to go in relation to future life and ministry. In this format, several participants shared the need to let go of the past, referring to programs and organizational structures that were no longer effective for current ministry, and embrace the future.

Recognition that the culture has changed and is no longer as favorable to the church as it once was requires that we be open and receptive to new forms and structures that will allow us to effectively engage the culture. Dreamscape participants responded favorably with a desire to respond effectively, expediently, and biblically to the leading of the Holy Spirit, building on our rich heritage as a denomination.

Illustration Four: Interview with the General Superintendent Dr. William Vermillion⁷

Rob: Dr. Vermillion, in regard to the future of The Evangelical Church as a denomination, what are your concerns? What do you feel the Spirit's attention is on for this time?

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ William Vermillion, interviewed by Rob Robinson, 14 December 2004, Pacific Conference Office of The Evangelical Church, Milwaukie, Oregon.

Dr. Vermillion: The Evangelical Church has experienced a great history, yet I believe the greatest days lie ahead of us. The response from the denominational leadership as they walked through the Dreamscape experience has been encouraging—what I see on the horizon and willingness I sense from the leadership for change—and the willingness to actually change. Not all change is good, but the changes we need to make will enable us to reach out to the current culture.

Rob: What do you see as the primary issue?

Dr. Vermillion: Rob, it's actually an issue of the heart—as it usually is. But in my judgment we lost a little of our edge, the edge we had when we began nearly thirty-seven years ago. Evangelism like our name implies is the biggest issue I see. This involves a passion for our people being concerned for their eternal destiny. It must be demonstrated in an incarnational and missional lifestyle like that of Jesus.

These are encouraging signs on the horizon for The Evangelical Church. The issues to be faced will be *defining moments*.⁸ The road ahead is marked by numerous challenges, and everyone knows that dialogue concerning change is much easier than change itself. With a heritage and history filled with people willing to make the necessary sacrifices, the journey over this threshold in the power of the Spirit is very practical.

Organizational Analysis

The structure of the Evangelical Church is governed by the guidelines set forth in *The Discipline of The Evangelical Church 2002*. This book of church polity is administered through a hierarchical structure that is both Episcopal and Congregational in form. The Discipline contains the rules, regulations, and resolutions governing this

⁸ The term “defining moments” was used by the Pacific Conference Superintendent in his 2004 report on page 89.

denomination. Within this organizational structure are six conferences across the U.S. led by a General Superintendent and six District Superintendents.

In recent years, there has been a refocus on evangelism and church planting at both district and national levels. As a smaller denomination of less than 150 churches and an aging constituency, the need to plant new churches and revitalize existing fellowships is crucial to our future.

To service this need, The Evangelical Church Denominational Board employed a Denominational Director of Harvest Ministries in October 2004 as a half-time position. He provides resources for church and leadership development, training, and assessment. He has developed vision, values, church planting philosophy, and a process for evaluating and training church planters. This involves church leadership intentionally investigating new forms, programs, and ministries that afford a bridge toward the culture, and providing processes that will facilitate building healthy, life-giving congregations.

Recently, the General Superintendent stated in response to the question, “Where is God taking us now?” “I believe very firmly that He desires for us to once again be a church-planting movement.”⁹

Historical Timelines

The Evangelical Church came into existence June 4, 1968 in Portland, Oregon. A group of former Evangelical United Brethren ministers and laity, representing some nearly 50 congregations in Oregon and Washington, took a giant leap of faith to begin the

⁹ William Vermillion, General Superintendent, “Report of the General Superintendent,” *Pacific Conference Annual Business Session* (Milwaukie, OR, July 27, 2005).

new denomination. They had desisted from the April 1968 merger of the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren denominations which formed the United Methodist Church. Before the end of June, laity and ministers from North Dakota and Montana, representing another 20 plus congregations, had joined their ranks.

In a sense, The Evangelical Church is not really a new church per se. Its roots can be traced back directly to the great religious revivals that influenced America at the close of the eighteenth century and beginning years of the nineteenth century. Particularly in southeastern Pennsylvania in and around Lancaster County, a revival of lasting influence occurred among the German immigrants. The denominational connections that flowed from this revival were dominated by numerous lay people resulting in The Evangelical Association (Church), the United Brethren in Christ, and the Methodist Church. In many preaching places, people often heard ministers from each of these groups on a regular basis. Occasionally, they shared the same barn, home, or chapel for their preaching services. This mutual interaction continued for many years.

The United Brethren and Evangelicals maintained their strong German ethnicity into the twentieth century. The Methodists, of course, became an American church in all sections of the country. In 1946, the Evangelicals and United Brethren came together to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church. With ethnicity no longer a major distinguishing mark, it was inevitable that the Evangelical United Brethren and Methodists would come together in a formal way as they did in 1968. However, there were some pockets of Evangelical United Brethren people who felt that spreading liberal theology was a price too big to pay.¹⁰

Today, The Evangelical Church constituency is older yet still maintaining their “harvest-focused, holiness-fueled” history and heritage. They are ready to engage the culture in ways that are conducive to both their theology and ethos. These elements are deeply embedded in the symbols and metaphors of this unique and distinct people.

Symbols and Metaphors

There are three significant symbols that identify Evangelicals and provide insight into their ethos. These are illustrated in The Evangelical Church logo. The first is the Bible, the Holy Scriptures. The Fourth Article of faith states:

The Holy Scriptures in their entirety are the inspired, inerrant written Word of God. They alone contain the will of God as far as it is necessary for us to know it for our salvation, so that whatsoever is not contained therein, nor can be proved thereby, is not to be enjoined on any as article of faith, or as a doctrine essential to salvation.¹¹



Evangelicals have long identified themselves as “people of the Book.” Their holiness lifestyle is a manifestation of this core value and belief. As they look to the future, the Bible continues to provide guidance and direction as in the past.

The second symbol is the cross. For Evangelicals, the cross points to the finished work of Christ as He paid the penalty to provide both salvation and sanctification. This includes making Christ Lord of one’s life and the call to a life of holiness. This was the element that empowered the early leaders of the denomination to make the sacrifices necessary to remain true to their calling to follow Christ.

¹⁰ Bill Vermillion and Eileen Reid, “What is The Evangelical Church?”, *The Evangelical Church*, http://theevangelicalchurch.com/what_is_the_evangelical_church.htm (accessed December 12, 2004).

¹¹ *The Discipline of the Evangelical Church 2002* (Minneapolis, MN: The Evangelical Church, 2002), 4.

The third symbol is the flame of fire representing the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. The fire metaphor in the logo points to the Spirit's work of heart purity. The Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father is one Being with the Father and the Son, convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. He leads men and women, through faithful response to the Gospel, into the fellowship of the Church. He comforts, sustains, empowers, and sanctifies the faithful, and guides them into all truth.¹² The endowment for incarnational living is the fire of the Holy Spirit, burning through and illuminating one's life. As one Evangelical Church pioneer, D. L. Vermillion, stated:

The church is the living body of Christ in the world ONLY as it lives and expresses itself as Jesus did! When we give Him his rightful place as the Living Lord of ALL life and EACH life, he will live in and speak through us.¹³

These three symbols and what they represent are shaping factors in the spiritual formation of the denomination.

As we are intent on celebrating our rich heritage while embracing the culture, questions arise regarding The Evangelical Church and its future:

- Knowing that The Evangelical Church has a rich heritage and history birthed with a passion to bring people into vital relationship with Jesus Christ, what will be required for its mission to continue and be fulfilled?
- Are there ecclesiological forms or structures that need consideration in light of our desire to develop new leaders and intentionally develop systems for assessing and coaching?

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John M. Pike, *Preachers of Salvation: The History of the Evangelical Church of North America* (Milwaukie, OR: The Evangelical Church of N.A., 1984), 205.

- Is there a simple model that can be developed for The Evangelical Church that will facilitate building wholesome relationships with individuals who are searching for spiritual and moral absolutes and stability?
- How do we as Evangelicals remain harvest-focused and holiness-fueled in contemporary terms to reach the emerging culture?

These are a few practical questions that The Evangelical Church, and to a larger degree the entire North American church, needs to consider. In the following pages, I will endeavor to answer the above questions.

Problem Claim

Along with the questions raised above the focus of this dissertation will address the another question: *Is the Simple Church paradigm appropriate for The Evangelical Church denomination in the areas of church planting, spiritual formation, and engaging the emerging culture?* This problem will be addressed by delineating Simple Church ecclesiology. This distinctive church expression holds imposing potential in answer to the above question. Simple Church is an organic ecclesiology that in form and function is often considered by some to be an anomaly because of its apparent non-structure. As The Evangelical Church focuses on being a church planting movement, how will the Simple Church aid and facilitate this process? The eclectic dynamic of our culture requires that The Evangelical Church provide multiple expressions of church life and ministry.

In *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, Leonard Sweet, who serves as General Editor, writes an essay for the introduction. The essay is in response to

H. Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture* (1951), which asked the question, What kinds of relationships does the Church want with the culture? "Niebuhr's book made a needed clearing in a forest where a great many scholars were lost, and the church has been camping out in Niebuhr's five-fold clearing ever since."¹⁴ Niebuhr's basic question is: How is Christ lived out in culture, and is faith shaped by criteria intrinsic to itself or in mutual exchange with the culture?

God's ultimate message communicated to humanity through all of history has been the Incarnation, which "means that Christ became a part of culture and can't be understood apart from culture."¹⁵ How do we live as followers of Christ in a changing culture, and live out the meaning of incarnation in a postmodern world? North American Churches constantly wrestle with this tension. Their response in the midst of the tension is found only in how each one expresses Christ in their distinctive church cultures.

Sweet suggests in his essay that the clearing Niebuhr made in the forest of Christian faith has been replaced by four types of clearings—Garden, Park, Glen, and Meadow—in which twenty-first century Christians labor. The word "clearing" metaphorically references God's kingdom and His Church, and how both individuals and the community perceive it. These four clearings are ecclesiological paradigms currently present in the North American context. This paper is about the fourth clearing, that of a Meadow. Each church clearing illustrates how the gospel message is incarnated, implying for each a distinct communication method. The point is that in all church

¹⁴ Leonard Sweet, (General Editor) et al., *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 13.

¹⁵ Leonard Sweet, *The Church in Emerging Culture*, 14.

settings, *what is communally incarnated is the message.*¹⁶ As such, “each clearing engenders a different eco-system.”¹⁷

Those in the first clearing of the Garden use only tried and true seeds which were inherited. They do everything they can to retain the purity of the seed and pass on the rituals of planting as they understand it. The word “garden” comes from an Old English word that means “enclosure.” Identity integration is highest in the Garden’s fenced enclaves of righteousness. Tension between Christ and culture is at its highest here, with a sense of being rooted to the past. In this system, time is measured in years, decades, and centuries, and totally dependent on master gardeners and other experts to pass on their knowledge. In the Garden, all the rows of plants are manicured and weeded on a regular and consistent basis. The fences and hedges around the Garden are often high and what goes on outside the garden is not as important as what is occurring within. It is a place where preserving the message and methods of gardening are sacred.

The Park is the favored habitat of much of the evangelical world. It is filled with variations in themes and expressions, but it is tied together by unifying paths and missions. “The fundamental premise of the Park is a truism of life: to stay the same, some things have to change.”¹⁸ The Park’s rules are often the first greeting a visitor receives and serve to facilitate exploration and mission. Numerous signs direct to where one needs to go to find what is wanted, during the specific hours the Park is open. In this clearing, the question asked is, “Are we living the incarnation of the gospel in our time?”

¹⁶ The italics are mine.

¹⁷ A premise of this document is that the Church is best understood as an organic ecosystem. All churches are not of the same ecosystem, but all are ecosystems of unique distinction.

¹⁸ Leonard Sweet, *The Church in Emerging Culture*, 26.

In the Park, leaders do nothing to interrupt the unity and continuity of tradition. Cultural conformity and Christ do not go together. “It is the church that goes out of its way to be contemporary simultaneously equating size and power with transcendental or spiritual importance.”¹⁹ The Park is always about preserving the message, while evolving new methods of communication to the culture. It is permissible to use the latest lawnmower or hedge-clippers just keep the Park looking nice for those who visit.

In the Glen, leaders find themselves spiritually unprotected in the scant clearing that is surrounded by encroaching vegetation and forestation. The Glen is a natural depression between hills, where a valley has been shaped. The Glen is often an open system that tries to behave as if it were closed. The densest fog in the Glen is technology. As technology enters the consciousness, it alters their view of themselves and the world. Within the Glen, there is an extreme social consciousness. They are more concerned about cultivating food from the land for the hungry than about the beauty of the garden flowers and parklands. The difference between the mentality of the Garden and the Glen is that in the Garden, you are what your parents planted, but in the Glen, you are what your seeds become. The Glen is about evolving the message while preserving the methods.

The last clearing is the Meadow always in a state of evolving message and methods, made up of low lying grasslands where wildflowers grow in profusion. Here a great deal of boggy places with fragile vegetation and colorful insects are found. Mountain meadows are dominated by wildflowers and thick mats of moss on the ground. Meadows are nomadic, wandering from space to space depending on the conditions of

¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

the surrounding grasslands. They are not highly managed by humans. A Meadow is what happens first after the devastation of a forest fire. For leaders in the Meadow, the imaginative architecture of the modern world is in ruins, and a new imaginative architecture is emerging. “The notion that Christians are new people who form their culture apart from others is anathema to Meadowers.”²⁰ They believe people today are starved not for doctrines but for images, relationships, and stories. A Meadow boasts the highest toleration for weeds, and rewards those species that continually adapt to evolving conditions. “A Meadow church is less concerned with old material to preserve than fresh material to assimilate. Rather than drain swamps and standing water, the Meadow lets the wetlands seed the soil.”²¹ The Meadow is inviting to those with bare feet and provides freedom to run, jump, and enjoy quagmires and thickets alike. Meadows are not nearly as accessible as Gardens and Parks; you often have to work to get to them.

In a world where we have gardened everything, the need for more green space magnifies the meadow’s presence. Leaders in the Meadow are less interested in a reformational paradigm (where the church has spent the last 500 years) than a missional paradigm.²²

The commonality worth mentioning is that all four clearings are organic ecosystems God has designed. In time, all these clearings change: Meadows become Glens, Parks and Gardens. For those of you who are one of the other three, I assure you my intention is not to invalidate or ignore your clearing. As a resident of the Meadow, let me share its enjoyments in order that you might understand some of its features. In order for the Church to function at optimum levels, it must do so organically, as the four clearings

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid., 35.

²² Ibid., 37.

illustrate. For this dissertation, the terms Meadow and Simple Church are nearly synonymous.

To begin, chapter two considers the organic nature and essence of the Church from a biblical perspective. The New Testament metaphors describing the Church are organic in nature, e.g. body, bride, household, family, household, and living stones. Because of the organic nature of the Church, it is important to understand the natural organic world as well. In learning about the natural order, we learn truths concerning God's spiritual eco-system, the Church. Mentioned in this chapter are four characteristics representative of numerous others in the natural and spiritual organic realms. These are simplicity, complexity, biotic potential, and self-organization. In the spiritual organic realm of the Church, there are corresponding components. The premise of this chapter is that Simple Churches are best understood and function at optimum levels organically rather than institutionally.

In chapter three, a historical perspective of Simple Church will be presented. The time span will cover from Christ to the present. The Simple Church originated with Jesus and continues up to the present. Throughout history, godly men and women from this paradigm have arisen to take the lead in the Reformation and several revivals. Tracing its roots, The Evangelical Church finds its genesis in this Simple Church paradigm. This unique paradigm is really not new, but as old as the Church itself. The simplicity and adaptability of this ecclesiology has rendered it contemporary and effective in every era. Much of the contemporary North American Church owes its life to this uniquely organic paradigm.

In chapter four, contemporary models of Simple Church are delineated with attention given to Church Multiplication Movement potential which is inherent to this form. The contemporary Simple Church movement in North America is described in some detail by highlighting some of its participants, from individual networks to denominations and para-church ministries who are embracing this church expression in a significant way.

In chapter Five, the subject of spiritual formation is discussed. The Spirit, the leadership, and the community work together symbiotically. Spiritual formation is more about shaping a community than an individual. Leadership is team-oriented, modeled after the fivefold ministry gifting described in Ephesians 4:11-12, termed APEPT teams, who oversee Simple Churches and the networks that emerge from their missional focus. Leadership is understood from an “*heirarchical*” rather than a “*hierarchical*” structure, and the normal clergy/laity distinction is deemed unnecessary.

Chapter six discusses the relationship of Simple Churches to The Evangelical Church denomination and the potential for future church planting. This chapter contains a proposal for The Evangelical Church to release those within its ranks gifted as APEPT team members to plant Simple Churches in their own neighborhoods and communities as the Spirit leads and directs. The chapter closes with several suggestions for The Evangelical Church to consider in order for it to welcome Simple Church ecclesiology within its ranks. The potential is overwhelming; only time will reveal the “immeasurably more” that the Spirit desires to do with The Evangelical Church in relationship with Simple Churches.

Earlier we looked at the four clearings of the Garden, Park, Glen, and Meadow. Each of these is a distinct ecclesiological paradigm with its own concepts of reality. Critical to this paper is the understanding that each individual and culture processes reality in the confines and boundaries of its own paradigm. In life, we encounter people who differ paradigmatically from ourselves, and therefore it is profitable from a missional perspective to understand paradigms other than our own. Because we all live in a time of transition, it is wise to consider thinking outside our own current framework.

Paradigm Thinking

As the North American culture transitions from modernity to post-modernity, it is crucial for the Church to think paradigmatically in order to respond to its various cultural contexts. For the characteristics of mystery, community, and symbol are understood when framed in this way. If we are able to understand one another's paradigms, it assists in the journey we travel in at least five ways, as Robert Webber suggests:

1. Paradigm thinking asks us to understand the past contextually. Each epoch of Christian history is to be studied in its own culture. Since the beginning, the Christian faith has been filtered through a variety of cultures.
2. Paradigm thinking allows us to have a deep appreciation for the past. We Protestants usually root out understanding of the faith in pietism, revivalism, or the modernist-fundamentalist controversy. We often freeze that particular moment in time, make it the standard expression of faith, and then judge all the other movements or periods of time by our standard. Paradigm thinking sets us free to affirm the whole church in all its previous manifestations.
3. Paradigm thinking also recognizes that the major models of the past continue into the present world. For example, Christianity adapted in the Greek world remains with us in Eastern Orthodoxy.

4. Paradigm thinking affirms the variety and diversity of the Christian faith and looks for the framework of faith that is common to the diversity. The search for common heritage allows for the emergence of a new understanding of unity and diversity. Unity is based on what is passed down in the ecclesio-social culture of the universal church, where diversity is a particular understanding of the faith that reflects the specific cultural context in which it was expressed. (e.g., medieval Roman versus sixteenth-century Reformation).
5. Finally, paradigm thinking also provides us with an intelligent way to deal with times of transition. For example, we currently acknowledge that the Christian faith is incarnated in the modern culture, with its philosophical assumption of a mechanistic world understood through the empirical methodology, and is eroding. The cultural revolutions are in the process of ushering us into a new era. In this swirl of change, many are seeking to honestly incarnate the historic faith in the emerging culture.²³

As the Church engages the culture, it is necessary to understand that most individuals and cultures to which it is attempting to connect with are part of a paradigm different than its own.

Terminology

Terms used in this paper hold the potential of clouding perception. Words are extremely critical, particularly in the postmodern context. In order to alleviate some of the misunderstanding, the following terms are defined as they will be used in this paper.

Simple Church An understanding of church that focuses on “*doing and being* church,” with most of the additives of traditional or institutional church removed. Some refer to this church expression with terms like “house church,” “open church,” “organic church” et al. I will

²³ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 16-17.

use the term Simple Church throughout this dissertation, referring primarily to “house church” and organic church.” I believe this term communicates to the culture and Church effectively and accurately.

House Church

A small group of Christ-followers usually numbering less than 20 who meet on a regular basis and are committed to Christ, his Church, and one another, using homes or other locations to gather for teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer.

Organic

An ecological term meaning “having or possessing life.” To refer to something or someone as organic is to state they are living. The Church is organic in nature and essence and is understood most accurately using this term. There are corresponding features between the organic natural world and the organic Church, the Body of Christ.

Church

Church at a very basic level is wherever two or three gather together in Christ’s name. The word “church” in this paper has little connection with a building structure, location, or some event.

Institutional

A term used in this dissertation to describe church organized in some form or system that requires a hierarchical structure in order

to facilitate operation and functionality. It is a church structure that functions more from an organizational rather than an organic base.

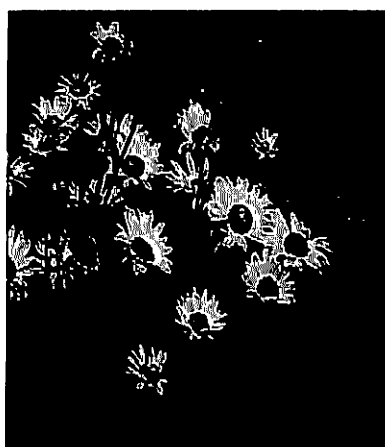
APEPT Team

A contemporary acrostic interchangeable with the Fivefold Ministry described in Ephesians 4:11-12. It is a term developed by Australians Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. APEPT is an acrostic for Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor, and Teacher. These terms will be used interchangeably throughout the dissertation.²⁴

²⁴ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 165-181.

Chapter 2 — THE ESSENCE AND NATURE OF ORGANIC CHURCH

*See how the lilies of the field grow.
They do not labor or spin
See how the lilies of the field grow.
They do not labor or spin¹*



There is no mistaking the fact that “organic” is a current buzzword. In contemporary culture, everything is organic. The reality is that everything has always been organic, but recently the world seems to have awakened to this truth. The dictionary defines organic in the following terms:

1. of or involving the basic makeup of a thing; inherent; inborn; constitutional
2. made up of systematically interrelated parts; organized of, having the characteristics of, or derived from living organisms
3. grown with only animal or vegetable fertilizers, as manure, bone meal, compost, etc.²

¹ Matthew 6:29.

² Webster's New World Dictionary & Thesaurus Version 2.0 (Macmillan Publishers, 1998).

Organic vegetables have nothing added to them. They are allowed to grow in a 'natural habitat' or at least in an artificially created environment that is as natural as possible.

This dissertation proposes an organic expression of what it means to be church. This type of organic expression attempts go beyond the additives and preservatives that have attached themselves to the institutional elements of the church and discover how the living body of Christ might flourish if allowed to live and grow naturally. Some of these institutional elements are current leadership and administrative structures, programs designed to enhance congregational viability and attractiveness, and resources deemed necessary for churches to function, e.g. buildings, educational materials, financial resources, strategies, long range planning, budgets, etc.

This chapter presents a perspective regarding the organic essence of the church. The church is best understood in ecological terms. At its core, it is designed by God to be organic both in form and substance. Corresponding to the natural order or eco-system, there is a spiritual order, the body of Christ. To aid in understanding the organic realm, let us look at the ecological sphere.

Understanding Ecology

According to the usual definition, "ecology is the scientific study of the relationship between organisms and their environment in their fullest meaning."³ Environment is inclusive of physical, biological, and living components that make up an organism's surroundings. Relationships include the interactions among the various

³ Robert Leo Smith and Thomas M. Smith, *Elements of Ecology* (San Francisco: Benjamin Cummings, 2003), 4.

organisms within the physical world of life forms participating together within a given ecosystem.

The term *ecology* comes from the Greek words *oikos*, meaning “the family household,” and *logy*, meaning “the study of.” Literally, ecology is the study of the household. It has the same root word as “economic,” or “management of the household.” We should consider ecology to be the study of the economics of nature.⁴

The major focus of ecology is the ecosystem. Organisms interact within the context of the ecosystem. The *eco* part of the word relates to the environment. The system is made up of a collection of related parts that function as a unit. A household is a system consisting of interrelated parts and subparts. Within this household are people who live together, extended family members, and other friends and relationships that are in continual interaction as they recreate, eat, sleep, and work together as interacting parts that support the whole. In this regard, all the parts and components of the Church universal together form an entire eco-system. The organisms of this eco-system are the local congregations, denominations, mission groups, and para-church organizations that are components of the larger Church universal eco-system.

A forest is a natural ecosystem. The physical (abiotic) components are the atmosphere, climate, soil, and water. The biotic components include the different plants and animals that inhabit the forest. The relationships are complex as each organism not only responds to the physical environment but also modifies it and in so doing, becomes part of the environment itself.

⁴ Smith and Smith, *Elements of Ecology*, 4.

Scriptural terminology suggests there are similarities between the Church and an organic eco-system.⁵ Organic implies that God grows the church using means that correspond with growth in the natural world. This is illustrated in Jesus' "Parable of the Sower" as recorded in three of the four gospels,⁶ regarding the kingdom of God. From this simple parable, we see that Church begins in the fields, where people are. Nearly all the New Testament metaphors for the kingdom and the Church use natural organic concepts and identities to describe them.⁷ Just as God breathed life into all living creatures (Genesis 2:7), He also breathed life into His Church (John 20:21-23; Acts 2). "The church in its most fundamental essence is nothing less than an interdependent, life-pulsating people indwelt by the presence of a resurrected and reigning Christ."⁸ Therefore, the organic church is a life-form designed by the Spirit to give expression to who Jesus is.

The New Testament employs terms like "household of God," "the people of God," "the bride of Christ," and "fellowship of the Holy Spirit." Ninety-six word pictures of the church have been identified in the New Testament. "Yet the image that permeates the New Testament understanding of the church and serves as an umbrella for all other metaphors is that of the church as *the body of Christ*."⁹

⁵ Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 1:22-23; 2:19-22; 4:16; 1 Peter 2:4-5.

⁶ Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:5-15.

⁷ Other examples of this are in Matthew 13: The Sower (vv. 1-23); The Weeds (vv. 24-30); the Mustard Seed and Yeast (vv. 31-35); the Net (vv. 47-50).

⁸ Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to The People of God*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 41.

⁹ Ibid.

Because these images are so prevalent in Scripture, it is necessary to comprehend the church realistically and correctly in organic terms. Howard Snyder, in *Liberating the Church*, suggests that the North American Church is in need of a fundamental paradigm shift in its self-understanding, one that would allow us to view the church as part of God's economy. He states:

Where the model is the institutional-technical-hierarchical of contemporary pop Christianity, a whole set of assumptions follows which make it difficult to really grasp the New Testament picture of the Church. But where the model is that of the body of Christ, the household of God and the community of God's people, the door is opened to understand the economy and ecology of God and to see the church as charismatic organism....¹⁰

To be organic is to possess life. And for the church, that life is spiritual, given by the Holy Spirit.

The church as the body of Christ is a living social, spiritual, charismatic organism, it is alive. The central biblical images of the church are all organic and ecological: body, bride, family, vine and branches. Even static "building" and "temple" images become organic: "living stones," "a growing building," "a temple animated by the Spirit" (see 1 Peter 2:4-6; Ephesians 2:19-22).¹¹

"The church is a divine organism mystically fused to the living and reigning Christ who continues to reveal himself in a people whom he has drawn to himself."¹² In all dimensions of life and ministry, the church is designed by God to be essentially organic in function and form.

¹⁰ Howard A. Snyder, *Liberating the Church: The Ecology of Church & Kingdom* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 69.

¹¹ Howard A. Snyder, *Decoding the Church: Mapping the DNA of Christ of Body* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 120.

¹² Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to The People of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 30.

Organic Metaphors

The organic nature of the church illustrated in Scripture clarifies for us God's design for in administering its nature and purpose. At this point, we will limit ourselves to two descriptive words, *family* and *body*; both of which are within the parameters of the above organic definition. The word *family* frames the paradigmatic form of church, while the body frames its substance. For the sake of clarification, the words *family* and *household* will be used interchangeably. Both metaphors are necessary to understand the organic paradigm and specifically the concept of Simple Church.

Family Metaphor

"The Bible employs the idea of God's house in several senses. These boil down to two fundamental ideas: The church is God's household or family, and the whole created order is, metaphorically, God's house (*beth-El*)."¹³ The Old Testament speaks much concerning the tabernacle and temple of God. At different times, both were places where God symbolically and in reality established His presence among his people Israel. Today, God's Spirit resides within His family the church. The following are a few examples:

Gal. 6:10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the **family of believers**¹⁴ (*oikeious*).

Eph 2:19-22 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of **God's household**, (*oikeioi*)
20 **built on** (*epoikodomeethentes*) the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

¹³ Snyder, *Decoding The Church*, 56.

¹⁴ The words highlighted bold are done by the author.

21 In him the whole **building** (*oikodomee*) is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

22 And in him you too are **being built** (*sunoikodomeisthe*) together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

In the Ephesians 2:19-22 passage, Paul is referring to the Gentiles' place in God's household. He describes how they as citizens of God's family are being included as participants; both in the building process itself, and as the material used to build the household. The Gentiles are now *members of God's household family*. "The household in ancient times was what we today might call an 'extended family.'"¹⁵

God dwells not in places, but with and in people. Paul, writing to the Corinthians about the specifics in regard to building the church upon the proper foundation of Jesus Christ asks this question: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"¹⁶ Paul's intention behind the question was to have the Corinthians understand that together they were God's temple where He resides. The church as a living organism takes its life from the living presence of the Holy Spirit. Together each individual who follows Jesus is immersed into the household, participates in the building process, and simultaneously becomes the building material as well.¹⁷

The Body of Christ

In looking at the *body* metaphor, Greg Ogden asks the following questions:

Is Paul's choice of the human body simply to be a nice analogy for the way the church is to function? Is Paul only saying that just as the body is an organic

¹⁵ Study note, *The NIV Study Bible: 10th Anniversary Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 3:16.

¹⁷ 1 Peter 2:4-5.

picture of interdependence, so the church should be? Or is there something deeper than metaphor that Paul has in mind?¹⁸

Paul seems to be pointing to a deeper reality. Metaphors are often symbols that point to deeper realities, but the symbol is not the same as the reality. An example of this is when Jesus broke the bread at the Passover meal before his disciples and said, “*This is my body given for you,*”¹⁹ “We Protestants do not believe Jesus was speaking literally. The bread was not in actuality his body, but it was a symbol that pointed to his broken body.”²⁰ In contrast, when it comes to referencing the church as the body of Christ, Paul intended much more than just a word picture. Reading 1 Corinthians 12:12 numerous times, I have subconsciously understood it in the following way: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, *so it is with the church.*”²¹ What is wrong with that? I emphasized (in italics) the way I have understood this verse to be. I have read *church* into the text because this is what I expected, since the church is Paul’s subject. But this is not Paul’s concluding phrase. He says, “so it is with *Christ*,” not *the church*. By interchanging Christ with the church, Paul is making the point, that the church is nothing less than the living extension of Jesus here on earth. The church and the resurrected, reigning, and living Jesus are inseparable. The church is not merely a human organization designated with the task of keeping the memory of their leader alive, but it is a fellowship of those who are members of Christ’s

¹⁸ Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 43.

¹⁹ Luke 19:22.

²⁰ Ogden, *Unfinished Business*, 43.

²¹ Emphasis is mine.

body giving viable expression to who He is. The church is an organism mystically fused to the living and reigning Christ who continues to reveal Himself in and through His people. Ray Stedman puts it this way: “The life of Jesus is still being manifest among people, but now no longer through an individual physical body, limited to one place on earth, but through a complex, corporate body called the church.”²²

As God’s household (*oikos*), the church is called to administrate kingdom economics in the process of bringing fulfillment to the larger eco-system, the created order. In order to complete this assignment, it is necessary for the church to perceive itself as a life giving and sustaining entity. In other words, the church is organic in essence in order to complete its mission. What follows is a closer look at the churches organic essence.

Organic Qualities

For this study, the organic qualities are simplicity, complexity, biotic potential, and self-organization. These qualities are presented with the understanding that they are not comprehensive or exhaustive. They overlap, assimilate, and are interdependent in relation to one another. Often the probability is high that characteristics found in one quality will be present in another. Like the natural eco-system, there is much to be learned as these qualities generally operate in simultaneity and synchronicity. Within the church’s genetic code, all these qualities are employed for the health and well-being of

²² Ray Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1972), 37.

the organism. The organic reality is “the church is a complex ecology of spiritual, physical, social, political, psychological, and economic dimensions.”²³

Simplicity

The first of these organic qualities is simplicity. In the organic paradigm, simplicity is foundational to the organic (simple) ecclesiology. Simplicity is not only an organic quality but an essential core value, a *necessity*, and something that is non-negotiable. ‘Simple’ is descriptive of the church in its most natural state. In practical terms, the following statements clarify what the term ‘simple’ means:

- By 'simple church', we mean a way of doing and being church that is so simple that any believer would respond by saying, “I could do that!”
- By 'simple church', we mean the kind of church that is described in the New Testament. Not constrained by structure but by the needs of the extended family, (*Oikos*)²⁴ and a desire to extend the Kingdom of God.
- By 'simple church', we mean a church that listens to God, follows His leading and obeys His commands.
- By 'simple church', we mean spiritual parents raising spiritual sons and daughters to establish their own families.²⁵

Simplicity is an organic quality that enables a congregation to maintain a low degree organizational complexity. In a way, it serves the function of keeping things uncomplicated. We often make church more complicated than it needs to be.

For years, the Body of Christ in Western Culture has assumed that Church is a major event requiring great expertise to lead. We have missed the essential truth that God fully intended Adam and Eve to be the foundational model for the Church. Church was meant to begin, and to be lived out, in the family. The

²³ Snyder, *Decoding the Church*, 38.

²⁴ “Oikos” as mentioned previously is a Greek word from a family of words based on the idea of a house or a household. In this case, *oikos* refers to the composition of the fundamental, natural unit of society, consisting of one’s relational sphere of influence and interaction—family, friends and associates.

²⁵ “Simple Church,” *DAWN North America*, <http://www.dawnministries.org/globalministries/northamerica/simplechurch.htm> (accessed April 20, 2003).

simplest expression of Church is the family. The essential building blocks for the Body of Christ are healthy spiritual families giving birth to healthy sons and daughters who give birth to healthy spiritual families. Healthy families reproduce and multiply.²⁶

No matter what its form, organic life is both simple and complex and occasionally these characteristics occur simultaneously. When simplicity holds a place of prominence in organic community, it serves as a stabilizing factor in its kinship with complexity. The relational dynamic of Simple Church produces a natural chaotic, complex flow of life. An example of this could be applying 1 Corinthians 14:26 in a simple gathering of believers. “What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.” For those looking in from the outside, this poses potential for chaos. But in community, remembering to keep it simple can bring focus to the entire gathering. Simplicity provides a framework for life in which to flourish in the midst of the complexity and chaos that any cultural context manifests. “The greater the complexity of the system, the greater the need for simplicity.”²⁷ Simplicity can negotiate complexity.

Complexity

The second quality is that of complexity. Over the past several years, substantial literature has introduced the new science of complexity. Scientists define complexity as a group of nonlinear systems composed of enormous numbers of parts. This is a broad-

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *A is for Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 71.

based inquiry into the common properties of all living things—beehives and bond traders, ant colonies and enterprises, ecologies and economies, you and me. “*Complexity and chaos* are frequently used interchangeably, even though they have almost nothing in common. The world is not chaotic; it is complex.”²⁸ For nearly seventeen centuries, Christendom has attempted to address complexity by means of an institutional, hierarchical, organizational structure, out of a desire to control and master this element. Like other organic qualities, complexity is natural *matter* in God’s created order.

In the past, achievements in molecular biology, described as “the cracking of the genetic code,” have maintained that the strands of genes in DNA operated like some kind of biochemical computer executing a genetic program. But increasingly, recent research has found this metaphor to be in error. Rather, it has been discovered “that the complete set of genes in an organism, the so-called genome, forms a vast interconnected network, rich in feedback loops, in which genes directly and indirectly regulate each other’s activities.”²⁹

Paul illustrates this complexity of interconnected networks and feedback loops as he describes the function of the body of Christ, the church.

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many.³⁰

²⁸ Richard Pascale, Mark Millemann, and Linda Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos: The New Art of Science and Management* (New York: Crown Business, 2000), 6.

²⁹ Leonard Sweet, *Eleven Genetic Gateways to Spiritual Awakening* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 20.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:4-5.

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.³¹

The word *complex* is defined in these ways: “a group of interrelated ideas, activities, etc. that form, or are viewed as forming a single whole.” Additionally, it is defined as, “an assemblage of units, as buildings or roadways, that together form as single comprehensive group.”³² Using these definitions in connection with our perception of the church leaves little doubt that Christ’s body is an extremely complex entity. In this sense, “complexity is another word for diversity. Only it’s much more complex!”³³

In reality the church is a mystery. “It partakes of the mystery of Jesus’ redemptive work. It experiences the wonder of new community and new humanity that is the body of Christ. The organic essence of the church is wondrously complex.”³⁴ As one looks at the human body, one is able to comprehend complexity, even while not always understanding this discordant system. A complex system is one in which a great many independent agents are interacting with each other in a great many ways. As people, “we are as different from one another on the inside of our heads as we appear to be different from one another on the outside of our heads.”³⁵

³¹ Romans 12:4-5.

³² *Webster’s New World Dictionary & Thesaurus Version 2.0* (Macmillan Publishers, 1998).

³³ Snyder, *Decoding the Church*, 35.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Michael C. Armour and Don Browning, *Systems-Sensitive Leadership: Empowering Diversity Without Polarizing the Church* (Joplin: College Press, 2002), 17.

The church is a complex system, a living organism. Consider the complexity of a church composed of only fifty people. There is, first of all, the complexity of the interaction of all these people (multiply fifty by fifty by fifty....!). Second, there is the relationship of each person to God, with no two relationships being quite the same. Throw in the complexity of personality types, cultural backgrounds, family experiences, job involvements, physical health or illness, denominational traditions, aesthetic tastes, and the multitude of choices each person makes daily, and you begin to get some sense of the church's real complexity! "The church is a complex ecology of spiritual, physical, social, political, psychological, and economic dimensions."³⁶

The very fact that people are diverse indicates that God intended the living organism of the church to be complex. Diversity creates complexity. "Diversity, you might say, is 'wired' into us. God created us that way. And since His gifts are always good, we need to see diversity as a blessing, not a curse."³⁷ Even the simplest congregational paradigm results in complexity because of the relational dynamics present within each congregation by God's divine design. Rather than denying complexity, the organic paradigm embraces it. It is in the journey where understanding and learning evolve, as participants within the organism find themselves stronger together than apart.

Biotic Potential

Another organic quality is "biotic potential." "Every student of God's creation—Christians and non-Christians alike—will eventually stumble upon something scientists

³⁶ Snyder, *Decoding the Church*, 38.

³⁷ Armour and Browning, 16.

call the 'biotic potential'."³⁸ Almost all of life is based on the multiplication of organic cells. "When we understand that the church is a creation of God, a 'biotic' organism, we must look for God's natural organic principles to understand how it grows."³⁹ One characteristic of biotic potential is its ability to utilize a minimum amount of energy to produce maximum results, and it occurs without outside intervention.

When this organic potential is in place, it prevents the church from becoming manufactured and shaped by outside forces, but allows it be recreated by the Spirit of God according to his design pattern. This biotic potential relates as well to the issue of simplicity. Nothing needs to be manipulated or manufactured in order for growth and health to occur. It occurs naturally as church lives out of its organic ecclesiological nature. Organic life has the natural potential to grow and reproduce itself. In his book, *Natural Church Development*, Christian Schwarz explains this natural characteristic, "Natural means learning from nature. Learning from nature means learning from God's creation, and learning from God's creation means learning from God the Creator."⁴⁰

A key Scriptural passage in understanding the biotic process is Matthew 6:28:
"See, how the lilies of the field grow."⁴¹

The word 'see' does not fully cover the implications of the Greek word *katamathete*. This is the intensive form of *manthano*, meaning 'learn,' 'observe,' 'study,' or 'research.'" Whenever the Greek *kata* is used in the form of a verb, it

³⁸ Christian A. Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 10.

³⁹ Wolfgang Simson, *Houses that Changed the World: The Returning of the House* (Cambria, UK: OM Publishing, 1998), 15.

⁴⁰ Schwarz, 8.

⁴¹ Matthew 6:28.

usually intensifies the word. In this context it would mean to *diligently* learn, observe, study, or research.⁴²

The imperative is not in regard to the beauty of the lilies, but rather their growth mechanisms, namely how they grow. The growth of plants and other living organisms reveal that they possess “biotic potential,” the capacity of an organism or species to survive and reproduce. “We should release the biotic potential which God has put into every church.”⁴³ This “biotic potential” is observed in nature through the apple tree that bears apples simply because it’s an apple tree. It was designed by its Creator to bring forth apples. The tree does not labor bearing apples, it does so by virtue of its nature.

When we understand that the church is a creation of God, a “biotic” organism, we must look for God’s natural, organic principles to understand how it grows. Biotic principles utilize the minimum amount of energy to produce the maximum results, and it happens “all-by-itself.”⁴⁴ Nowhere in Scripture is this principle more clearly illustrated than in John 15:4-5:

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

⁴² Schwarz, 9.

⁴³ Schwarz, 10. This does not eliminate the need for disciples to be taught the basics of their faith and spiritual skills to mature and grow. In reference to the term “biotic potential,” believers are taught the following: (1) How to cultivate the soil of human hearts by building relationships; (2) How to sow the seed of the Word when appropriate in relationship to the particular soil; (3) How to tend the plants following germination, and (4) Particulars in harvesting the fields in various cultural contexts. But instruction on how to grow (to germinate the seed) is understood to be God’s responsibility.

⁴⁴ Simson, 15.

Strongly suggested in this text is that as the branch remains in the Vine, fruitfulness of the branch occurs as a result of its relational connection and total dependence on the Vine.

This biotic potential is available to every congregation for the purpose of growth and development. The use of marketplace and corporate growth models stunts the natural/spiritual biotic potential from being released and thus suppresses God's designed pattern. Good intentions would be better utilized in minimizing obstacles to God's natural growth process. This is not to say that no effort be administered, but to remember that God's design is readily available if patience and persistence is exercised.

Self-Organization

The last organic quality to be mentioned is self-organization, which refers to a process in which the internal organization of an open system increases automatically without being guided or managed by an outside force. Self-organizing systems typically, though not always, display emergent properties.⁴⁵ Self-organizing is a shared dynamic within living systems.

Fritjof Capra in *Web of Life* describes the following self-organizing characteristics which are the main elements of the unified theory of living systems. The second and third characteristics are our focus because of their relationship to the organic nature of the church. The first characteristic is only briefly mentioned.

⁴⁵ See *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergence> (accessed September 9, 2004). This website defines "emergent" as a process of deriving new or coherent structures, patterns, and properties in a complex system. This phenomenon occurs due to the pattern of interactions between elements of a system over time. It should be noted that the North American Church qualifies as a complex system within the parameters of this definition. Self-organization in a system typically occurs in the context of complexity and/or chaos. For a greater development of this idea, see Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life: A Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 75-111.

The first characteristic is the constant creation of new structures and modes of behavior in the self-organizing process. "Structural changes occur within a given 'variety pool' of structures, and the survival chances of the system depend on the richness, or 'requisite variety,' of that pool."⁴⁶ The human body and its aging process is an illustration of this characteristic. As old cells die off other cells emerge to replace them.

The second characteristic is that self-organizational models all deal with open systems operating far from equilibrium.⁴⁷ In other words, a constant flow of energy and matter through the system is necessary for self-organization to occur. The emergence of new forms and structures is the hallmark of self-organization and occurs only when the system is far from equilibrium. In conventional thinking, equilibrium emerges as a goal for congregational life, "a condition in which all acting influences are canceled by others resulting in a stable, balanced, or unchanging system. In physics it is the condition of a system in which the resultant of all acting forces is zero."⁴⁸ This condition results in all activity as being zero, and in this dimension, everything is static.

Equilibrium is a result of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. It is the tendency of closed systems to wear down and give off energy that cannot be recovered. When equilibrium has been achieved, all energy has been dissipated. But this law only applies to isolated or closed systems. "The most obvious exception to this law is *life*. Everything alive is an open system that engages with its environment and continues to grow and

⁴⁶ Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), 85.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *The American Heritage College Dictionary*. 1993. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

evolve.”⁴⁹ Science, culture, and the church have been thoroughly influenced by the images of deterioration contained in this law. “If we believe that the universe is on a relentless road to death, we can’t help but live in fear of change.”⁵⁰

Church consultants frequently discover their task is one of encouraging congregations away from a place of being safely balanced on a teeter-totter of their own making to a place of non-equilibrium in order for change to ensue. The good news is the church is organically designed by its Creator to be an open rather than a closed system. To stay viable, open systems maintain a state of disequilibrium, keeping them off balance in order for growth and change to occur. They participate in an open exchange with their world, using the elements of disequilibrium to their advantage and for their own growth and health. “Every organism in nature, including us, behaves this way.”⁵¹

Science has discovered when open systems experience disequilibrium, they possess the capacity to both change and exchange energy, trading usable energy for entropy. The result is that the possibility of deterioration is greatly reduced and on occasion extremely unlikely. “Disturbances create disequilibrium, but disequilibrium leads to growth.”⁵² The organic Simple Church is often perceived as bedraggled and confusing to those not familiar with this expression of church. To those within organic ecclesiology, disequilibrium is accepted as the norm.

⁴⁹ Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), 77.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Capra, 85.

⁵² Ibid., 79.

Science has now had to abandon its views on decay and dissipation and is transforming its theories concerning the role of disequilibrium. Scientist Ilya Prigogine demonstrated that disequilibrium is the necessary condition for a system's growth, and named these systems *dissipative structures* bringing attention to their paradoxical nature. Explaining these dissipative structures in *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret J. Wheatley states:

They dissipate or give up their form in order to recreate themselves into new forms. Faced with increasing levels of disturbance, these systems possess the innate ability to reorganize themselves to deal with the new information. For this reason they are called *self-organizing systems*. They are adaptive and resilient rather than rigid and stable.⁵³

It is this fluid dimension in the organic paradigm that enables it to gain momentum as it chooses to move beyond equilibrium to disequilibrium, resulting in change and adaptation. The organic paradigm stays strong by staying open as change becomes part of its life cycle. Wheatley goes on to say that:

Self-organizing systems offer compelling lessons in how the world works, of how order is sustained in the midst of change... [L]et us stand still for a moment and dwell in the realization that we live in a world of inherent order, where paradoxical but natural processes exist for growth and self-renewal."⁵⁴

"The viability and resiliency of a self-organizing system comes from its great capacity to adapt as needed, to create structures that fit the moment. Neither form or function alone dictates how the system is organized."⁵⁵

What this means for the Church is significant. The human tendency to strive towards equilibrium and status-quo is harmful to its existence. Disequilibrium is good

⁵³ Ibid., 80.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 82.

and forces change and adaptation in order for the system to incur greater strength and viability, transforming into something congruous to the whole of the eco-system.

The third characteristic of self-organization is the nonlinear interconnectedness of the system's components. This view of life carries the concepts of feedback and self-regulation in closely linked networks. In this, there is the potential for network arrangements capable of self-organization.⁵⁶ Nonlinear interconnectedness opens up a world of random and scale-free networks.

The term "scale-free" was first coined by University of Notre Dame physicist Albert-Laszlo Barabasi and his colleagues as they mapped the connectedness of the World Wide Web. They were surprised to find that the structure of the Web didn't conform to the then accepted model of random connectivity. Instead, their experiment yielded a connectivity map that they christened "scale free." Scale-free networks, including the Internet, are characterized by an uneven distribution of connectedness. Instead of these network nodes having a random pattern of connections, some nodes act as "very connected" hubs, a fact that dramatically influences the way the network operates. Matlis notes regarding the complexity of these networks and systems of relationship that they share important connections: "Some nodes have a vast number of relational connections to other nodes, while most nodes by comparison have just a handful of links. The popular nodes usually called 'hubs' can have hundreds, thousands, even millions of links."⁵⁷ The nodes of scale-free networks are not randomly or evenly

⁵⁶ Ibid., 83-85.

⁵⁷ Dwight Friesen, "Scale-Free Networks as a Structural Hermeneutic for Relational Ecclesiology," unpublished essay, December 12, 2003, Bellevue, WA.

connected. Scale-free networks have many “very connected” nodes, hubs of connectivity that shape the way the network operates.

Within organic systems, scale-free networking occurs in the natural flow of life. The world-wide web is an example of this. Within nine clicks of a computer mouse, one is able to reach most anywhere in the world. The Web has evolved through relational connections of people. The networking of the Web is typical of the social nature of human beings in their everyday relational connections at work and play. Looking through organic lenses, it is probable that whatever landscape one is viewing, this relational dynamic is occurring on a continual basis. This characteristic speaks to the issue of component connectivity within organic life. In this nonlinear relationship of looping and feeding back on one another, the symbiotic nature of the whole organism is manifested in self-organization, benefiting both of the individual genes and the entire eco-system.

Conclusion

This organic ecclesiological perspective is not presented as conclusive, but desiring to pique interest and further investigation. The expectation was to provide some clarity in understanding the organic dimensions resident within the church in order to provide health and vitality. Whatever form and substance organic ecclesiology holds, these qualities will be present. None of these qualities holds greater value or priority than another as they function together in organic fashion within the life-form of the paradigm. It should be mentioned that simplicity is not limited to being an organic quality, but extends itself as a core value. Within the Simple Church model of organic

ecclesiology, much of life and ministry evolves from this quality. Keeping things simple is the sign post guiding Christ communities on their organic journey.

Based upon the numerous occasions New Testament writers refer to the Church using organic metaphors, the Church ought to perceive itself in this light. And as such, function accordingly, understanding that the realm of simplicity, complexity, biotic potential and self-organization is where the Church must live.

I conclude with words from Howard Snyder:

The church is a mystery partly because of its unique spiritual-physical-genetic structure. Yet throughout history, church leaders and theologians have often reduced the wondrous mystery of the church to more easily grasped human-size models—the church as a building, a hierarchy, an institution, or even a political force. The New Testament sense of the church gets lost in such approaches. Historically, whenever the church has failed to make a culturally transforming impact, one reason has been an insufficiently biblical model of the church. We do better when we stay closer to biblical models, even if they leave us with questions.⁵⁸

Biblical ecclesiology is replete with organic dimensions, more organic than institutional. In the next chapter, the organic Simple Church ecclesiology will be observed historically beginning with Christ and extending to its connection to and with The Evangelical Church.

⁵⁸ Snyder, *Decoding the Church*, 35.

Chapter 3 — A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF HOUSE CHURCHES

For many of us today, the word 'church' elicits images of a special man running a special service in a special building on a special day for a special fee. Or, it might bring to mind things like boards, denominations, organizations, or those who serve as full-time clergy.

Because this pattern has existed for the past 1700 years within most Christian traditions, it may come as a shock to find out that Christians in the first century gathered, organized, and thought of themselves in a very different way. They would have found what is considered church today, especially as it appears in the West, quite foreign.¹



Organic Church History

The purpose of this chapter is three-fold. First, we will examine the role of *house*, and more specifically the *house church* and *household* in the New Testament, beginning with Jesus and extending through church history until the present. Second, I will

¹ Rad Zdero, *The Global House Church Movement* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2004), 17.

illustrate that throughout Church history, the *house* or *household* has played a significant role in the church's missional responsibilities of expanding the kingdom of God throughout history.

To clarify the general ecclesiological terminology used in this study, I define the following terms. A *house church* is a group of Christians that meet in a private home or any other location where small groups are able to gather.² A *local church* consists of all the Christians that gather at a geographically definable location, e.g., town or city. It should be noted here that the terms *organic* and *house church* are synonymous terms due in part to the emphasis within the Simple Church community to function organically rather than organizationally.

Jesus' Use of Houses

According to the Gospels, Jesus' ministry can be divided into two periods: his public ministry, and following that a period of time when, due to persecution, he was forced to minister in more private settings, most likely in domestic houses. Even during the period of more public ministry, we can assume that Jesus used houses in order to instruct his disciples, particularly at night or during times of inclement weather.

This assumption that Jesus used houses for his teaching ministry as well as for other activities is supported by three insights. First, in the ancient Jewish, Christian, and Hellenistic worlds, a private home often provided the meeting place for religious and intellectual dialogue and instruction. During Jesus' time, Jewish teachers were known to

² In the 21st Century organic paradigm, the term "house church" contains limitations as numerous as any traditional term. For the postmodern culture, the church gathering together extends beyond the limits of an individual private home. Church occurs wherever two or three people are able to gather together in Jesus' name (e.g., park, pub, restaurant, theater, or other public spaces).

make journeys, but for the most part they remained at home and led a fairly sedentary lifestyle.³ Their followers usually came to them. The Gospels often report that individuals or groups came to Jesus as the news of his presence in a town or village became known, particularly in Capernaum. Over the course of Jesus' ministry, people's encounters with him were often in someone's home.⁴

On the basis of Mark 2:1, Matt 4:13,⁵ and Matt. 9:1,⁶ one could form the opinion that after Nazareth, Capernaum became Jesus' residence. The narrative from Matthew 17:24-27 strongly implies that Capernaum was indeed Jesus' home. While Jesus was living, or at least staying, in the house of Peter, the men who collected the temple tax approached Peter's residence and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the Temple tax?" Peter's reply was affirmative. If a man was not able to deliver his taxes to the temple, he was allowed to do so at his place of residence.⁷ Matthew reports that it was Peter who paid the taxes for Jesus and himself, implying that Jesus resided in his home. It follows that at least temporarily, Jesus made his residence in Peter's house in Capernaum, if only from Matthew's perspective.

The second insight regards the economic and social significance of an *oikos* (Greek for *house*), in the ancient world in Israel and specifically in Galilee. It should be understood that houses played a central role in the life and ministry of Jesus. All of life

³ F.H. Borsch, "Jesus, the Wandering Preacher?" *What About the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1975), 45-63.

⁴ Matt. 8:14, 9:10; Mark 1:32, 2:1-5.

⁵ It is reported here that Jesus left his original home, Nazareth, and he "came and lived in Capernaum."

⁶ "and came to his *own* town."

⁷ W. Horbury, "The Temple Tax," *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1984), 190-195.

revolved around the household. Synagogues were widespread in 70 AD and earlier, not only in the Diaspora, but in Palestine as well. Often the primary synagogue form was that of a private home that served with or without architectural alteration as a place of assembly. “We can assume, particularly for the poorer areas of Galilee, that these were house synagogues rather than the pompous structures we are familiar with from the third to sixth centuries C.E.”⁸ These house synagogues probably existed in relatively small Jewish villages.⁹ These venues were available to Jesus during his ministry.

Jews of the first century were accustomed to meeting for worship in private homes, which would also apply to Jesus and his disciples. The gospels report that homes were a natural place for Jesus’ life and ministry. He was worshiped as a baby in a house.¹⁰ He healed Peter’s mother-in-law in her home.¹¹ The Last Supper was held in a house.¹² Jesus preached to people crowded into homes.¹³ He trained his disciples using a hands-on assignment by sending them out in pairs to preach from village to village. He instructed them to find “a man of peace” in each village that was responsive to their message and build a spiritual base of operations from that home.¹⁴

⁸ Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 2004), 30.

⁹ L.I. Levine, “Ancient Synagogues Revealed,” *Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society* (1981): 19-335, 52-59; R. Riesner, “Synagogues in Jerusalem,” *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, vol.4, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 179-211.

¹⁰ Matthew 2:11.

¹¹ Matthew 8:14-16.

¹² Matthew 26:18.

¹³ Mark 2:1.

¹⁴ Luke 10:1-11.

On two occasions, Jesus sent his disciples out on missionary journeys. The first was the sending of the twelve recorded in Matthew 10 where they were instructed to look for a “worthy person.” The sending of the seventy-two is found in Luke 10, where Jesus instructs his disciples to look for a “man of peace.” In addition, they were to stay there upon finding this particular person, that is, reside with him in his home. It is interesting to note that before Jesus instructed his disciples in this missional method, he himself already applied this truth. Peter seems to serve Jesus as a “worthy person of peace.”

If this perspective is correct, “it follows that Jesus may have undertaken a Galilean village-to-village (or house-to-house) mission, in which houses, households, and sedentary followers of Jesus played a role similar to that which they played in Capernaum.”¹⁵ It is also probable that Martha’s house in Bethany was a counterpart to Peter’s house in Capernaum, even though it might not have held the same prominence. Mark reports that Jesus often went from Jerusalem to Bethany.¹⁶

Through his own ministry, Jesus established a method for advancing the kingdom of God. Missional disciples are sent out to various towns and villages in search of a person of peace. Upon finding this person, they are to reside there with him, using that location as a missional outpost or center for ministry. As we will see, this methodology seems to be carried forward in the missional enterprise of the Early Church under the Apostle Paul’s leadership.

¹⁵ Gehring, 43. See also Mark 6:1, 6, 56; 8:27; 9:30.

¹⁶ Mark 11:1, 11-12, 15, 27; cf. Matthew 21:17.

How Did Early Christians Perceive Themselves?

Before investigating the missional methodology of the Early Church, we need to understand how Christians understood themselves in light of being the church. “Their beliefs determined their behavior, their function determined their form, and their mandate determined their method.”¹⁷ This is crucial in understanding the Early Church and the role that *house* and *household* played in shaping them as God’s people. Images they held of themselves include: the assembly, the Body of Christ, and the Family of God. This is not an exhaustive list, but these perspectives facilitated how the Early Church expressed itself in an organic manner.

The Assembly

The first and most common imagery elicited in the New Testament is described by the Greek work *ekklesia*, appearing in the text 114 times. This word has two meanings: that of being called out, and that of being assembled together. In actuality, we cannot experience the church until we come together. To illustrate, consider a husband and wife who are separated by distance from each other. They do not experience the full benefits and blessings of their marriage until they are together. The same holds true for the church.

This word *ekklesia* as used in the New Testament is not a religious word. In Acts 19, the Apostle Paul was threatened by an angry mob wanting to kill him. Luke uses several different words to describe this mob: *the whole city*, *the people*, *the crowd*, and three times he used the word *assembly*.

¹⁷ Zdero, 18.

The **assembly** was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there... The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: "Men of Ephesus... if, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls... If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal **assembly**..." After he had said this, he dismissed the **assembly**.¹⁸

The word *assembly* used in the above passage in the original language is *ekklesia*, which is the same word that is translated *church*. So Jesus used a common word when he said, "I will build my Church."¹⁹ It was not a religious word. It simply meant a called-out group or crowd, a fellowship or assembly. The Early Church understood itself in these terms, as a group of people responding to the invitation to come and follow.

Regarding the word *church*, gathering or assembling believers encompassed three ideas: (1) meeting in someone's home,²⁰ (2) the gathering of the citywide or regional church,²¹ and (3) the church universal.²² The word is never used in reference to a special building, a religious ceremony, or a class of paid professional leaders. This differs from the majority of North Americans' perceptions when considering *church*: usually they are thinking in terms of a building or an edifice. "This would have been unimaginable to the Early Church. This particular word brings out the importance of clustering, assembling, or meeting together as believers."²³ This does not discount the reality that the clustering, assembling, or meeting together of the Early Church occurred at other locations also, not

¹⁸ Acts 19:28-41; emphasis is mine.

¹⁹ Matthew 18:16.

²⁰ Acts 2:2, 5:42, 12:12, 16:14-15, 20:20; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15-16; Philippians 1:2.

²¹ Acts 9:31; Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians. 1:1; Gal. 1:2; Ephesians. 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Col.1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1.

²² Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 12:28, 15:9; Ephesians. 1:22, 3:10-11, 5:22-32; Hebrews 12:23.

²³ Zdero, 18.

only in homes. When the church gathered together, the location was not a place used solely for religious purposes. Usually, the particular places or locations held a multiplicity of uses.

The Body of Christ

Another way the Early Church understood itself metaphorically was of a body, specifically the Body of Christ.²⁴ This implies a living, organic, and mutually dependent relationship between the members of the body. “Just as a headless body is lifeless and cannot function, so too is a head useless on its own unless it has a body that will do its bidding.”²⁵ Paul emphasizes that as Christ gives direction to his body, its component parts—believers—are united in common purpose. They were also to recognize and celebrate the distinctive parts within the body.

Each member of the community was granted a ministry to other members of the community. This means that no person, or group of persons, can discount on the basis of their particular gifts other contributions to the “body” or impose uniformity upon everyone else.²⁶

This indicates the primary aspects which the church understood to be important: unity among members and equal opportunity for each part’s ministry.

The body imagery also brings attention to the mobile nature of the church. Just as a human body has mobility, so does the church. Rather than being confined to a specific

²⁴ Romans 7:4; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, 12:4-30; Ephesians 4:11.

²⁵ Zdero, 19.

²⁶ Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 64.

location or place, the body exercises mobility as an innate function. This allows for organic flexibility and fluidity.

The Family of God

Not only did members of the Early Church see themselves as a people called out, gathered together, and the Body of Christ, but they also understood themselves individually as being part of the Family of God. The writings of the apostles are full of familial references in regard to the church. Alongside the body imagery stands that of the family. Scriptural references are made to the terms *family of God*, *little children*, *God's household*, *brothers*, *sisters*, and *children of God*, with God being the Heavenly Father.²⁷

Their understanding of community was couched in their understanding of family. This was extremely helpful due to the fact that Christians may not have had anywhere else to meet other than homes, since synagogues eventually became off limits to them. In all probability and for practical reasons given the character of their community, "the homes of its members provided the most conducive atmosphere in which they could give expression to the bond they had in common."²⁸ Family describes the relational environment which members lived out with one another.

Early Christians related well to the above images, perceiving themselves as both Christ's body and God's family due to the strong familial bonds and legal ties within the ancient culture that characterized their lives. These terms shaped their ecclesiology. In looking at the Early Church, which really was a Jesus movement, it "identified itself

²⁷ John 1:12-13; Ephesians 2:19; Galatians 6:10; 1 Timothy 3:4-5, 15, 5:1-2; Hebrews 2:11; 1 Peter 4:17; 1 John 2:1, 12-14, 3:1; 2 John 1:1.

²⁸ Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, 61.

more along the lines of relationships with each other and Christ, rather than membership in an organization.”²⁹ The numerous metaphors used of a family, body, household, flock, and spiritual temple indicate that the church “held to a family and organic theology of the church.”³⁰ This image and form of church has existed since its birth in the book of Acts. It has experienced times where it flourished and times when it barely survived. But as church history chronicles, the Spirit has used organic ecclesiology to bring renewal and reform at key moments to the Body of Christ at large.

The Evidence of Houses in the Early Church

When Early Church believers did gather together it was generally in someone’s home. The *oikos* was of fundamental importance for society and economy in the ancient world. “It was not just one social or economic form among others but rather the basic social and economic form of the ancient world and the New Testament and presumably for every pre-industrial sedentary culture as well.”³¹ Nothing determined daily life more than the *oikos* with its network of relationships. It was an all-encompassing social structure with legal, economic, and biological implications. “By belonging to an *oikos*, each individual gained a sense of identity within the society as a whole; it provided them an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside,’ not only a dwelling place but also a home.”³² Because of this, the *oikos* was critical for the development and growth of the Early Church.

²⁹ Zdero, 56.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Dieter Lührmann, “Neutestamentliche Haustafeln und Antike Ökonomie,” *New Testament Studies* 27 (1981): 87.

³² Gehring, 17.

During its first three hundred years, the Early Church employed three house structure options. Roger Gehring illustrates in the following:

(a) A room, usually a triclinium³³ of a private domestic house, made available at specific times for religious purposes without architectural changes to the structure of the house. (b) A room (or several rooms) in a private domestic house was used exclusively for religious purposes with perhaps an architectural adaptation of the house (*house church*). (c) An architecturally adapted house (*church house*) or a public building (*hall church*) belonged to a private individual but was used exclusively for religious purposes. Even though all three types existed during the NT period, the last two were the exception.³⁴

From an architectural point of view, the house offered certain strengths by providing space that could be used in a variety of ways for missional outreach. Houses were adaptable and provided a low-cost venue for the church to gather. With relatively little effort, it was possible to establish a Christian presence in the everyday of the ancient world.

In light of the central significance of the *oikos* in the ancient world and the role it played in Jesus' ministry, houses were also determinative in Paul's missional endeavors. Several accounts in the book of Acts and Paul's writings illustrate this point. On one occasion when Paul was in Philippi on the Sabbath, his companions went to the river to find a place of prayer. In the process, they encountered some women.

One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.³⁵

³³ Triclinium is defined as "a couch extending around three sides of an ancient Roman dining table, for reclining at meals. *Webster's New Dictionary & Thesaurus Version 2.0* (Macmillan Publishers, 1998).

³⁴ Gehring, 288-289.

³⁵ Acts 16:14-15.

Then there is the account of Paul and Silas encountering the Philippian jailer:

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.³⁶

Among the passages where Paul mentions house churches, those Christian fellowship groups that were formed in and/or around an *oikos* are four in number. First, Paul writes to Ephesus, “The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house”³⁷. Second, about three years later, Paul writes to the church in Rome, “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. Greet also the church that meets at their house”³⁸. Third, Paul writes a note from prison to Philemon, his friend who is most likely residing at Colossae. In this greeting, he writes: “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother: to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home”.³⁹ Fourth, in the epistle to the Colossians, Nympha receives this greeting: “Give my greeting to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house”.⁴⁰

³⁶ Acts 16:29-34.

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 16:19.

³⁸ Romans 16:3-5.

³⁹ Philemon 1-2.

⁴⁰ Colossians 4:15.

The evidence is clear that house churches were prominent in the New Testament. Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Cenchreae, Ephesus, Rome, Colossae, and Laodicea were cities with fully functioning and viable house churches. In addition, each city contained a plurality of house churches.⁴¹ One example is found in the letters to Rome and Corinth. The multiplicity of congregations is thus evidenced:

Paul distinguishes between an *ecclesia* as a whole (the Church of God in Christ) and on the other hand concrete local churches that are spread out in different cities (Corinth, Rome, etc.), the expression *kat' oikou* is nothing other than an individualization of the church as whole in separate congregations.⁴²

When Paul uses these two different expressions for *church*, it implies a close association and partnership between the individual congregations and the larger, citywide body, or local church.

Gehring notes that “in recent research scholars tend to agree that the early Christian movement was characterized by the coexistence of two church forms: the house church and the whole church in a given location.”⁴³ Within local churches, there existed house churches in which most of the activities and life of the members occurred. The church was understood in regional terms rather than by the denominational or doctrinal boundaries we know today. This ecclesiological methodology served the Early Church well in its missional endeavors with focus on specific, targeted cities, areas, and occasionally an entire region. The household rendered the church extremely effective.

⁴¹ Gehring, 130-155.

⁴² Gehring, 157.

⁴³ Ibid. See also Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 37-42; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 1983, 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale University, 2003), 75-76.

The Missional Importance of the House

To understand the role which *house* played in the missional outreach of the Early Church, one needs to look at Paul. Paul was shaped by his mission experiences in Syria and Cilicia,⁴⁴ as well as his time at the side of Barnabas in the Antioch church. Ultimately, he went on to become independent of the Antioch church and developed his own missional enterprise.⁴⁵ Called by God in Christ Jesus to preach the gospel among the Gentiles,⁴⁶ he was convinced of the necessity to reach the entire world. Encouraged by an agreement with the Jerusalem Council, he launched out from the region of Antioch in southern Asia Minor. In several significant cities such as Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus, he proclaimed the gospel and established churches, following the commercial trade routes. Initially, his mission embraced only the urban centers. “From the book of Acts and Pauline Epistles, it is clear that Paul practiced ‘cell planting’ missional outreach in these cities.”⁴⁷ The references to Paul’s extended stays in the cities of Corinth and Ephesus confirm this picture.⁴⁸

Paul believed that his main objective was to establish small cells, often in someone’s home, as a base of operation in these cities and develop missional outreach. He began with these bases, moved out to the city itself, and then to the surrounding areas.

⁴⁴ Galatians 1:12

⁴⁵ This followed the Antioch incident and applies in particular to Paul’s second missionary journey.

⁴⁶ Romans 1:5, 13; 11:25; 16:26; Galatians 3:8.

⁴⁷ Gehring, 180.

⁴⁸ 1 Corinthians 16:28; Acts 18:18; 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, 6; staying in these cities long enough to establish cell congregations.

Often Paul did not stay in these cities until the cells were fully developed and self-reliant. He trained them to take responsibility for their own community life and the missional outreach in their surrounding area. The resources Paul used to accomplish this usually included a second visit, letters, and the employment of coworkers in establishing and looking after these congregations.

These churches, established by Paul, expressed their sense of missional responsibility by making individuals within the congregations available to the Pauline mission.⁴⁹ Through the congregants who were released from local responsibilities and sent out, these churches participated in the missional outreach of the apostle. “This is the first time that the practice of “center mission” becomes historically tangible in the early Christian movement.”⁵⁰ As Gehring, explains:

This term implies a series of young congregations networked with and equal to one another in the (capital) cities, that is, *centers*, which then became bases of operation for the Pauline mission. They formed these bases by sending workers to Paul to help with missional outreach for a limited time. “Center mission” is opposite of the centrally organized mission of the Antioch church. There the base of operation was one single congregation, which, as the “mother church,” sent out traveling missionaries on mission journeys, who went from location to location as itinerant preachers, staying for a brief time at each and then finally returning to the mother church.⁵¹

Although Paul’s approach to missions was innovative at the local level, he retained important elements of Jesus’ itinerant mission for his own missionary practice at

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 16:15-18; Philippians 2:25-30; 2 Corinthians 8:18-19. Stephanas, Fortunatus, Achaicus, and Epaphroditus are among them.

⁵⁰ Gehring, 181.

⁵¹ Ibid. This would be in keeping with Jesus’ instructions to the Twelve in Matthew 10 and to the seventy-two in Luke 10.

a regional and worldwide level.⁵² To understand the full impact of the Early Church's endeavors under Paul's direction, we need to look at missional outreach that occurred from house churches.

Missional Outreach of House Churches

Local churches were the base of operation for Paul's mission as they provided workers to maintain and sustain his endeavors. The local churches, however, consisted of one or more house churches. The households in which they gathered were the source of workers for the mission in any particular city and surrounding region. They were, in fact, the cornerstone for the entire local and regional missional endeavor.

Using organic terminology, Paul describes his work as that of a gardener who only planted while others watered.⁵³ Paul understood his place and responsibility in the overall scope of his mission. His statement indicates that he "saw his ministry primarily in the establishment of small cells out of which full-fledged congregations would later develop."⁵⁴ These small cells, however, were house churches. This point is not to prove that house churches are more effective evangelistically than larger traditional congregations, only to direct attention to built-in missional potential due to their presence in the community. The fluid nature of a Simple Church network facilitates engagement with the communities.

⁵² Romans 15:19-29.

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 3:6.

⁵⁴ Walter Vogler, "Die Bedeutung der Urchristlichen Hausgemeinden Für die Ausbreitung Des Evangeliums," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 11 (1982): 790; quoted by Gehring, 182.

Some of Paul's coworkers were householders⁵⁵ themselves, for example, Stephanas from Corinth along with Priscilla and Aquila. Others were members of households, such as slaves who were released for ministry by their owners.⁵⁶ This release for mission is what could be termed an *oikos factor* which is found on numerous occasions in the book of Acts. The economic and social resources of the ancient *oikos* made the provision of coworkers possible. This whole process could be coined in modern terms as a relational network.

The Relational Network

The most formidable feature of the Simple Church paradigm from Jesus to the present is the relational dynamic. A phrase often used is: "Everything occurs in the context of relationship,"⁵⁷ and for Paul and other participants in the Early Church, this was no exception. As in Jesus' mission and in the Early Church in Jerusalem, Paul relied on his relational base of householder coworkers to orchestrate his missional endeavors. He made this work by exercising the cultural dynamics of hospitality, letter writing, and travel. Let's look briefly at Paul's three practices.

⁵⁵ A householder was the head of a household with a degree of legal responsibility for those within his charge. The members of one's household were family members, slaves, freedman and tenants with solidarity of the household based on economic, psychological, social and religious factors. See also Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 1983, Second (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 68-69.

⁵⁶ An example of this is the house of Philemon in Colossae; his house church was able to contribute to Paul's mission in and around Ephesus through Onesimus. See Philemon 13; Colossians 4:7-8.

⁵⁷ This phrase is voiced multiple times in Simple Churches.

Hospitality

“Some of the specific characteristics of ancient hospitality, a phenomenon that was integrally linked to the ancient *oikos*, were of great significance in the context of Paul’s mission.”⁵⁸ Hospitality was important not only for Christian missionaries but, also for those Jewish and Christian businessmen traveling on business. There were numerous public inns available, but were generally avoided by both Jews and Christians due to their bad reputations. Travelers resorted to the private homes of their fellow believers.⁵⁹

This practice of hospitality was not viewed only as a means of addressing a practical problem. Statements from various New Testament writers show it was frequently viewed as a concrete expression of love. “Love must be sincere.... Be devoted to one another in brotherly love... share with God’s people who are in need, practice hospitality”⁶⁰.

“Traveling Christians appear to have assumed that they would be received hospitably wherever they went.”⁶¹ These ideas emerge from New Testament writings, especially from Luke, e.g. Acts 21:4ff. Travelers including Paul planned their own and

⁵⁸ Gehring, 182. See also Adoht von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, ed. and trans. James Moffatt, 4th ed, (New York: Harper, 1962), 1924, 219-224. D.W. Riddle, “Early Christian Hospitality: A Factor in the Gospel Transmission,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, no. 57 (1938).

⁵⁹ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 1983, Second (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 66-67.

⁶⁰ Romans 12:9-13. Other Scriptural examples of hospitality are found in Hebrews 13:1-2; 1 Peter 4:8-10.

⁶¹ Malherbe, 67.

their companions' itineraries on this assumption. For example, Paul wrote to his friend Philemon to prepare a guest room for him.⁶²

Letters and Travel

In addition to being the primary means of long-distance communication in the ancient world, letter writing belonged to the customs associated with hospitality. Letter writing was widespread and evolved into a fairly fixed set of practices over time. One example is the letter of recommendation, with its standardized form and technical language, which usually addressed the hospitable responsibilities of the householder.⁶³

In Romans 16:2, Paul presents a case study regarding a letter of recommendation where Phoebe is the central character. He makes a request to the Church in Rome to accept Phoebe. She delivered Paul's letter, which he dictated during his last stay in Corinth as a guest in the house of Gaius (cf. Rom 16:22-23) and sent to Rome from there (Acts 20:3). "It is possible that Phoebe read and commented on the letter in the various house churches in Rome."⁶⁴ It is important to Paul that she be given respect and all the assistance she needs. Just as she offered Paul and other Christian's hospitality in the church meeting in her house in Cenchreae, the urban house churches in Rome were also to receive her and give her their hospitality. "Paul's old house church network from the

⁶² Philemon 22. Further examples of this are found in Titus 3:13f.; Romans 15:23f.; 1 Corinthians 16:11.

⁶³ Malherbe, 94-103; Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 51-70. See 1 Corinthians 16:15-16, 17-18; Philippians 2:29-30, 4:2-3; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, and Romans 16:1-2 as examples of such letters of recommendation.

⁶⁴ Gehring, 183. See also Finger R. Halteman, *Paul and the Roman House Churches* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 26, 75; Robert Jewett, "Paul, Phoebe, and the Spanish Mission," *The Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 142-161.

Aegean was now providing entry into the new house church networks in Rome, through the exercise of letter-writing and hospitality.”⁶⁵

Paul’s correspondence was an integral part of his mission made possible by networks of house churches scattered through the various regions he traveled. “Every one of the letters he sent needed one or more carriers, who were dependent on a sending *oikos* for the resources necessary to start the trip and along the way, on the hospitality of several additional houses for lodging and resources to continue the trip.”⁶⁶ Examples are both Stephanas and Epaphroditus traveled on behalf of their congregation to visit Paul.⁶⁷ Stephanas delivered a letter with questions from the Corinthian church to Paul.⁶⁸ Scripture indicates he was a householder in Corinth,⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 16:17 states that he along with Fortunatus and Achaicus would visit Paul in Ephesus. And Epaphroditus brought Paul material support from the church of Philippi.⁷⁰ These and many other men Paul used to carry communication between himself and the congregations he established. Here we see the normal process of missional development within the functions of *oikos* networks exercising the relational dynamics of hospitality, communication, and travel.

⁶⁵ L.M. White, *Building God’s House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1990), 106.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 228-229.

⁶⁷ Philippians 2:25.

⁶⁸ 1 Corinthians 7:1; 8:1; 12:1.

⁶⁹ 1 Corinthians 1:16; 16:15.

⁷⁰ Philippians 4:10-18.

House Church and Evangelism

The house was significant as a meeting place and a source of contacts. Paul used the house not only as a base of operations for missional outreach, but also for evangelistic purposes as well. He and his coworkers placed their main ministry emphasis on evangelistic proclamation, through their personal confession of faith and through the attraction of their community life together. Gentiles and pagans “encountered the gospel from the very beginning in most cities not as one lonely voice but rather in the context of a practicing faith community.”⁷¹ The web of relationships between the various city church networks made the missional expansion of the Early Church a reality.

In this paradigm, the Early Church’s missional enterprise not only provided the means for planting local church networks, but was instrumental in training and developing leaders.⁷² The hosts of the churches became the natural leaders of the church. “Rather than inheriting leadership, the house church structure imparted, through the hosts (usually householders), actual leadership which in turn determined the form of church life (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:16).”⁷³

The overall significance of house church in the Pauline mission must be seen as positive. As operational bases for local church life and for urban and regional outreach, house churches were the architectural, social, personal, and economic foundation for missional enterprise of the Early Church.

⁷¹ Gehring, 188.

⁷² The issue of church leadership will be addressed in Chapter Five, Simple Church Spiritual Formation.

⁷³ Floyd V. Filson, “The Significance of the Early House Churches,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, no. 58 (1939): 109.

Church History

Church historian Donald F. Durnbaugh shows there is, in fact, a house church tradition identifiable throughout the church's history. He notes that "the newer renewal movements often copied the earlier ones without having knowledge of them."⁷⁴ Following Constantine's accession, radical developments of hierarchies occurred, resulting in the elevation of the priesthood above the laity. This facilitated the establishment of a professional clergy system modeled after Roman government and military systems. It was during this time that construction of special church buildings became prominent as a political state-church merger became a reality. Thus "Cathedral Christianity" was born.

The Church to a large degree embraced these moves. After years of struggle and persecution, it felt like the Body of Christ had finally conquered the evil empire, but in reality it was the most tragic moment in Church history had now appeared. Rad Zdero described the transition this way:

After trying hard to destroy the church by beating it with a stick, Satan now dangled a carrot in front of its eyes. Sadly, this was the moment when the church said 'yes' to the same temptations that Jesus himself said 'no' to in the desert, namely the temptations of power, popularity, and position.⁷⁵

Currently in many sectors of the world, there is a move of God through Simple Church that is beginning to shake church structures and paradigms. As one church historian describes:

⁷⁴ Donald F. Durnbaugh, "Intentional Community in Historical Perspective," *The House Church Evolving* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1976), 19.

⁷⁵ Zdero, 61.

Events in the history of the churches in the times of the apostles have been selected and recorded in the book of Acts in such a way as to provide a permanent pattern for the church. Departure from this pattern has had disastrous consequences, and all revival and restoration have been due to some return to the pattern and principles in the Scriptures.⁷⁶

Beginnings

By 380 AD, influential bishops Theodosius and Gratian decreed that there should be one state-recognized church that dispensed doctrinal beliefs to its constituency. Private home meetings were effectively outlawed for fear of heresy and splinter groups. What followed over the next 1,700 years have been state-run and/or denominational churches often organized and managed like political empires. Christendom emerged, rather than grassroots communities of believers on mission from God. Special church buildings replaced the need for Christian hospitality. Paid clergy replaced the priesthood of all believers. Programs and rituals replaced Spirit-led, open, passionate meetings. A religious organization replaced the living Body of Christ. But throughout history, there were numerous reform and renewal movements which flourished: Donatists, Priscillians, Paulicians, Peter Waldo and Waldensians, Francis of Assisi and the Little Brothers, John Wyclif and the Lollards, Peter Chelcicky and the Czech Brethren, and multitudes of others who went unrecorded in the annals of history.

Some of these groups were more orthodox in their doctrine than others. They often advocated pacifism, identified with the poor; either marginalized or promoted common people's access to and understanding of the Bible, and advocated the equality of women. Another common element found in many of these movements was meeting in

⁷⁶ E.H Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church*, Grand Rapids: Gospel Folio Press, 1999), 26.

private homes. It is difficult to determine whether this was due to persecution and poverty or biblical conviction. These radical movements, however, continued to challenge the religious establishment in its thinking and practice. We will look at some examples.

Pre-Reformation

Priscillian (340-385)

As a Spanish nobleman of wealth, position, education, and great personal charisma, Priscillian was initially more interested in Greek philosophy than in Christianity. He eventually converted to Christ, was baptized, and began a life of serious devotion to God. As a serious student of the Bible, he began to preach and teach as a layman and initiated a lay movement of brotherhoods throughout Spain and France which were open to all baptized converts. These meetings were primarily Bible reading sessions, with both genders participating. He was eventually joined by a large number of bishops and priests, who were rebelling against the state church by asserting the independence of each local congregation.

In time, false accusations arose that Priscillian embraced a kind of Gnostic-Manichaeism, which taught that physical matter was evil. This led to his arrest by Roman Emperor Maximus along with six of his friends. They were all beheaded in Trier, France. After his death, the movement grew such that it took two centuries to stamp it out completely.

Peter Waldo (1150-1206)

Waldo from Lyon, France belonged to an emerging class of merchants and artisans trying to find their place within the traditional feudal system. He developed an

interest in the gospel accounts of Christ's life and employed a monk to translate biblical selections into the vernacular. Much reading and study of these texts convinced him he could no longer participate in the quest for power and affluence his peers were engaged in. He eventually renounced his wealth and felt that only those who embraced apostolic poverty could in good conscience preach the gospel. Waldo and his friends became known as the Poor Ones of Lyon, and were dedicated to itinerant preaching tours, traveling by two's throughout France.

Their work expanded throughout Europe. So commanding was their influence that it was believed by the canon of Notre Dame that a third of all Christendom had attended Waldensian meetings. Their meetings occurred outdoors after nightfall under the direction of an itinerant brother. After opening in prayer and sermon, they went back into their homes for supper meetings to pray, discuss, and eat the Lord's Supper.

The Reformation Onward

Considering the history of the Evangelical Church, there is evidence that organic ecclesiology is no stranger to those who have preceded us. As members of the Protestant Church, our roots can be traced back to Martin Luther (1483-1546), the German Reformer. Knowing that reforms could be made, Luther suggested "that a third order of service in private homes should supplement the public Latin and German language masses."⁷⁷ The purpose of these groups was to engage the people in prayer, Bible reading, baptism, the Lord's Supper, accountability, and collecting for the poor. Luther refused to pursue this idea for fear of the divisiveness he felt these groups would cause.

⁷⁷ Martin Luther, preface to *The German Mass and Order of Service*, 1526. Quoted in Zdero, 64.

The initiator of the Reformation discerned the benefit of such groups in the spiritual formation and development of his own parishioners.

Caspar von Schwenckfeld (1490-1561), a disciple of Luther and influential nobleman who later became an outlawed Reformer, earned that distinction in desiring to reform the church by making use of the Scriptures, especially the book of Acts. For the last thirty years of his life, he became a wanted man in Europe, fleeing persecution by Lutheran preachers, all the while starting home fellowship groups that focused on prayer and Bible study.

Juan de Valdes (1500-1541), of Jewish descent, became a key player in advancing the lay movement in Spain and Italy known as “Evangelism” or “Valdensianism.” His meetings were informal and involved the participation of both men and women, attracting a large number of Jews and other outsiders. During the last ten years of his life, he founded a community in Naples that met in private homes on Sundays for Bible study and prayer and was united in its concern for the poor.

George Fox (1624-1691), who founded the Quakers, traveled around England as a young man sharing his concerns about the practices of established churches. Many of the early Quakers went out two by two and began traveling throughout England and eventually the world. They emphasized the work of the Spirit in the believer’s life, the inner light and seed in each person, piety, and open Spirit-led church meetings. To eliminate false distinctions between sacred and secular places of worship, they preached in the open air and met in homes.

Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) was the founder of Pietism, whose main strategy was to supplement Sunday morning services with small home groups called “pious

gatherings” in which the priesthood of all believers would be practiced. Pastors or professors would serve as qualified facilitators of these groups, focusing on discipleship and holiness. “Through his book *Pia Desideria* (meaning ‘Pious Desires’) his influence was felt by both Moravians and Methodists, who in turn had a major role during the 18th century Great Awakening.”⁷⁸

Organic Roots of the Evangelical Church

John Wesley (1703-1791) was an Anglican priest who, after serving at various parishes, returned to Oxford to join his brother Charles and a friend, George Whitefield.⁷⁹ Together they formed a small group for accountability, prayer, Bible study, community, and works of charity. Following his return from an unsuccessful missionary journey to America, he began to preach outdoors to crowds, something that was frowned upon by the religious establishment in that day. Over the next fifty years, he sought to train his converts in cell groups of six to twelve people for accountability, discipleship, care for the sick, and meeting the needs of the poor. Wesley became so convinced of this method that he refused to preach in any area unless he was permitted to organize converts into cell groups with adequate leadership installed. His simple strategy was to “preach in as many places as you can, start as many classes as you can. Do not preach without starting new classes.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Zdero, 68.

⁷⁹ Howard Snyder, *The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 81-83.

⁸⁰ George G. Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 119.

The lay leaders of these classes consisted of both men and women who acted as pastors and disciplers. The classes themselves functioned somewhat like house churches meeting in the neighborhood homes of its members for lecture-style teaching and hymn singing. To manage and oversee these small group fellowships, Wesley assigned circuit riders who would travel from city to city to bring cohesion and direction. Howard Snyder reports:

...after thirty years, 1768, Methodism had 40 circuits and 27,341 members. Ten years later the numbers had grown to 60 circuits and 40,089 members; in another decade, 99 circuits and 66,375 members. By 1798, seven years after Wesley's death, the totals had jumped to 149 circuits with 101,712 members.⁸¹

This method became well established in America, which was only emerging as a nation. Much of the spiritual development of this nation is due in part to the early Methodists who settled here. "The Methodist Circuit Rider acted as a visiting pastor, occasionally visiting the church under his care."⁸² He was primarily the overseer of the local church. Each circuit included 20 to 30 preaching points. Worship services were generally held in whatever facilities were available—sometimes outside. The circuit rider was unable to shepherd this number of preaching points, so the class president, typically a farmer-preacher, served as the under-shepherd. He was the one who actually led the congregation. William Sweet explains how the circuit rider typically functioned:

The circuit-rider succeeded in securing a foothold for his work in a new country as illustrated by the early activities of Benjamin Ogden. Ogden probably came to Kentucky by way of the Ohio River, landing in Maysville. Making his way to Simon Kenton's Station, about three miles to the southwest, he found the cabin of Thomas Stevenson and his wife, Methodists from Maryland. There he was welcomed and there the first regular Methodist preaching took place. Ogden

⁸¹ Snyder, *The Radical Wesley*, 54.

⁸² Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Church of America: 1776-1990 Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 73.

visited among and prayed with the families in the station, and before he left for central Kentucky he had formed a class, evidently with Stevenson as the class leader. At the end of the first year ninety members were reported from the Kentucky Circuit.⁸³

In describing this method's impact, Colin Goodykoontz elaborates:

It is doubtful if a missionary system better adapted to the needs of the frontier in the early part of the nineteenth century could have been found than that used by the Methodist Episcopal Church. The settlements were widely scattered; the people generally had not the means, and frequently not the desire, to call and settle ministers in their midst. Church buildings were rarely found, but that did not hinder the work of the itinerant; the cabin of a friendly settler would do at the outset... The Methodist circuit riders were the advance guard of American Christianity in the occupation of the West.⁸⁴

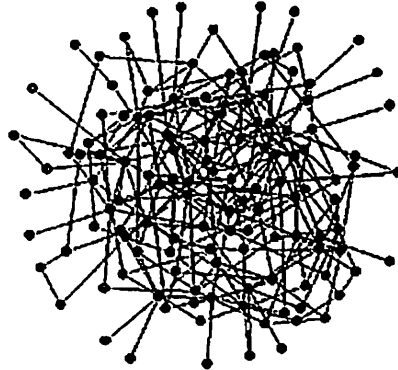
If you contemporize this model within the current North American landscape, there are numerous similarities between Methodism and the current movement of networking house churches. As is evidenced by history, Wesley was an apostolic visionary who understood the organic nature of the church. We in The Evangelical Church trace our roots to him.

In the next chapter, Simple Church forms and structures that are a part of the current global and North American church landscape will be presented, as well as how spiritual formation and leadership develop within this paradigm, and how it contrasts with more traditional church models.

⁸³ William Warren Sweet, *Religion on the American Frontier, 1783-1840*, The Methodists, vol. IV (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946), 52-53.

⁸⁴ Colin Brummit Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier: With Particular Reference to the American Home Missionary Society* (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1939), 161-162.

Chapter 4 — SIMPLE CHURCH FORM AND SUBSTANCE



The church must not stand still, because in every age it must seek to be a true expression of the kingdom. From time to time old patterns must be reviewed and renewed. I believe that we are in such a time.¹

In this chapter, current Simple Church form and expressions will be discussed and occasionally contrasted with the more prevalent and familiar traditional church in contemporary culture. In order to delineate Simple Church ecclesiology, it is necessary to make this contrast as we look at the contemporary perspective.

To begin, we will look at two church definitions that will aid in understanding the substance of Simple Church. Following this, we will assess the value of church multiplication movements and how Simple Church is sometimes evaluated, then look at this paradigm in its North American context. For illustrative purposes, an Epic

¹ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers and Paternoster Press, 2002), 10.

Wineskin's gathered worship experience is described to give the reader a conception of what is possible in an organic setting.

Neal Cole makes this definition of Simple Church: "The presence of Jesus among his people called out as a *spiritual family* to pursue his mission."² This definition is helpful because it focuses attention on the nature of Simple Church, that of a spiritual family on mission for Jesus.

Another definition of Simple Church in practical terms is, "A loose-knit network of Jesus followers who gather together to encourage each other in their spiritual life and who go out, moved by the Holy Spirit, sharing and demonstrating the Gospel."³

Delineating this definition elucidates the Simple Church paradigm:

Loose-knit: No formal membership required, just a love-commitment to God and to one another. This implies free-flowing and at times unstructured form. What is absent within this ecclesiology are organizational structures reminiscent of institutional church structure, such as hierarchical positioning of participants, formation of committees, strategic planning and goal setting, vision casting, and detailed line item budgets. Often this "loose knit" feature is interpreted by non-participants as out of control, chaotic and messy.

Jesus followers: The basic requirement for church membership is almost always absent in a Simple Church structure. Those who have answered Christ's call to come and follow him are considered eligible for full participation within the community.

Who gather together: Gathering together in order to build one another up and worship. This normally occurs within a family environment sharing a meal and conversation face to face. Interaction and participation among all is highly sought after in this dynamic.

² Neil Cole and Paul Kaak, *The Organic Church Planters Greenhouse: Intensive Training Event Participants Notes* (Signal Hill, CA: Church Multiplication Associates, 2003), 1-2. Neil Cole is a nationally recognized authority in the area of Simple Church ecclesiology. See also Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God* (Carol Stream, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1999).

³ "House Church Basics – Part 1-A: What is Church," *HouseChurchBlog*, February 25, 2004, http://sojourner.typepad.com/house_church_blog/2004/02/_house_church_b.html (accessed October 10, 2004).

Who go out: The purpose of believers is to GO with the message of good news. Rather than spending energy and resources in order to be attractive, Simple Church is about being missional extending God's kingdom to all venues of life.

Moved by the Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit as the primary leader of the Church, forms and informs the congregation as to its incarnational/missional responsibilities. All human leaders serve in Christ's kingdom enterprise in partnership and under the direction of the Spirit. Leadership is first and foremost service based.

Sharing and demonstrating the gospel: The reason that the church GOES.⁴

In the Early Church, sometimes apostles were present and other times they were not. Sometimes elders were present, but many times they were not. The church consists of followers of Jesus who are engaged in *gathering* and *going*. Added to this, the institutional necessity of a specific or permanent location and/or structure is missing.

Simple Church people voice the words of Wolfgang Simson:

The 'Body of Christ' is a vivid description of an organic being, not an organized mechanism. Church consists, at the local level, of a multitude of extended spiritual families, which are organically related to each other as a network. The way these communities function together is an integral part of the message of the whole. What has become a maximum of organization with minimum of organism has to be changed into a minimum of organization to allow maximum of organism.⁵

Simple Church in all its expressions remains true to its essential nature as a dynamic, living organism as opposed to a mechanistic structure.

Church Multiplication Movement Approach

Throughout the world, house churches have historically played a significant role in providing a viable avenue for birthing and establishing church congregations and

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Simson, xx.

discipling new believers. What is relatively new and quite significant is that across America, this phenomenon is spreading. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, numerous Simple Churches and their networks are emerging. Church planters are being commissioned by the Spirit to plant small congregations based in homes or other locations outside the normal traditional context. These types of church plants are found in parks, pubs, schools, art galleries, coffee shops, cafes, and restaurants. Wherever believers congregate, the possibility of a viable Simple Church is a reality. There are multiple approaches to planting and sustaining these communities. One approach is that of a Church Multiplication Movement or CMM. This translates into the church reproducing itself multiple times over, as in a multiplication of smaller congregations. This possibility emerges due to its simplicity. As DAWN Ministries states:

We believe that the most effective way to fulfill this purpose is to embrace the concept of Simple Church. This is one of the keys to *saturation church planting*⁶ because only that which is simple can multiply rapidly and organically. Simple does not imply a particular structure but builds on the foundation of household and extended family.⁷

The goal of Simple Church is to become a church planting, church multiplying movement.⁸ This is the primary criterion by which Simple Church measures itself and

⁶ Italics are mine for emphasis. "Saturation Church Planting" is not a synonymous term, but is often thought as similar or identical in concept. Saturation Church Planting is the emergence of small congregations established in the midst of every class, kind, and condition of people groups on the earth. A church planting movement is one where congregations are reproducing themselves in multiplicative dimensions. See <http://www.dawnministries.org/globalministries/northamerica/churchplanting.htm>.

⁷ "Simple Church," *DAWN North America*, <http://www.dawnministries.org/globalministries/northamerica/simplechurch.htm> (accessed April 20, 2003).

⁸ It should be noted that Church Multiplication Movements are just one goal of the larger Simple Church movement. There are two factors to be considered in regard to these movements. First, potential is present for these movements because they are biblically based. Secondly, it is more difficult for these movements to emerge within the institutional structure due to the built-in organizational composition. By virtue of the presence of an institutional structure, the 'simple' dimension is absent. Church Planting/Multiplication Movements will be referred to CMMs for the remainder of this paper.

can occur in quite a rapid fashion. The ultimate goal is to see North America infiltrated with healthy communities of believers that naturally reproduce themselves and fill the continent with the love, care, and compassion of Christ Jesus. It is the organic dimension of Simple Church that causes reproduction, namely conversion growth, which in turn forces congregations committed to maintaining their small size to divide into two or more congregations. Simple Church's ultimate aspiration is that of becoming a CMM.

What follows are some specifics regarding CMMs. First, a CMM involves multigenerational reproduction and a gathering together and assimilating of Christians from other congregations to form new congregations. A CMM is not a series of revival meetings or evangelistic crusades, nor is it a centralized leadership structure that sends out many church planters. Southern Baptist Church Planter David Garrison, who coined the term, defines a CMM as: “A *rapid*⁹ and *multiplicative* increase of *indigenous* churches planting churches with a given people group or population segment.”¹⁰

According to Garrison's definition, there are several key components in his definition provide further clarity to Simple Church. The first word that catches our attention is *rapid*. As a movement, a CMM occurs with rapid increases in new church plants. “Saturation church planting over decades and even centuries is good, but doesn't qualify as a Church Planting Movement.”¹¹ Rad Zdero, co-founder of House Church Canada, believes “house churches need to blueprint themselves with a healthy emphasis on evangelism, the goal being multiplying their house church into two or sending a team

⁹ Italics are mine and will be delineated in the following pages.

¹⁰ David Garrison, *Church Multiplication Movements* (Richmond, VA: International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1999), 7.

¹¹ Ibid, 8.

to start a new one.”¹² These types of congregations ideally grow large enough within six to nine months to form a second group. A Toronto house church network has adopted the following goal: “Every house church starts a house church each year.”¹³ This is reasonable considering that doubling a Simple Church only means going from 10 to 20 persons in the course of an entire year.

Second, there is potential for *multiplicative* increase. The increase in churches is not simply incremental growth—adding a few churches every year or so. “Instead, it compounds when two churches become four, four become eight to ten and so forth.”¹⁴

Simson provides the following Simple Church scenario:

A typical congregation may have between six to twenty people, and usually doubles itself once every six to nine months. For our example we take the average size of 12 people per house church, and a less-than-average doubling rate of 12 months. We also assume that in the first year of operation, the house church actually does not double itself at all: it may have a leadership problem, or some other starting problem. We remain slightly pessimistic and also assume a 25 percent fallout rate, and periods of growth and consolidation, which means that one out of every four house churches which are started will eventually close down within any given five-year period for a number of reasons. This will give us the following scenario:

Figure 4.1 Exponential Growth Chart

After year	Number of house churches	Number of people
1	only 1, not 2	12
2	2	24
3	4	48
4	8	96
5	12 (=16 less 25%)	144
6	24	288
7	48	576

¹² Zdero, 113.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

8	96	1152
9	192	2304
10	288 (=384 less 25%)	3456
15	6912 (=9216 less 25%)	82,944
20	165,888(= 221,184 less 25%)	1,990,656

This scenario, which has truly happened several times in history as well as in recent times, will incorporate almost 2 million people in a house-church (organic) movement with a period of 20 years.¹⁵

Simple Church congregations are multiplicative in structure, continuously multiplying as simple structure is maintained and quality leadership is in place. This translates into churches being started by the churches themselves, rather than by professional church planters or missionaries.

Finally, CMMs are *indigenous churches*. This means they are generated from within rather than from without. This is not to say that the gospel is able to spring up intuitively within a people group. The gospel always enters a people group from the outside, which is the task of the missionary. “However, in a CMM the momentum quickly becomes indigenous so that the initiative and drive of the movement comes from within the people group rather than from outsiders.”¹⁶ Peering through the organic lens of “simple,” it is readily seen that new life, leadership development, and training along with ministry emerges from within.

The evidences of a church multiplication movement are:

- Simple and reproducible strategies that release the common Christian for uncommon work.
- Evangelism and reproduction that is natural and spontaneous.
- Reproduction that occurs at every level and in every unit of the church life developing from micro to macro.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

- Interdependence among the churches, not dependence and not
- Churches are self-perpetuating and self-propagating.¹⁷

Self-perpetuating translates into a congregation that is healthy and enduring. It will continue to live without the need of outside infusion and resources. This kind of congregational life will naturally be self-propagating.

Currently, CMMs are worldwide in scale. The kingdom of God has not seen such an outbreak of the multiplication of new disciples since the book of Acts. In recent years, this movement has grown in Communist China, spread throughout Africa and South America, and moved on to Europe and the United States. It is the fastest spreading expression of evangelical church planting in the world today. The focus and purpose of this expression is to be neighborhood-based by building bridges and immersing Christ-followers in areas that concern lost neighbors, thus being salt and light while conspiring to extend extraordinary kindness and love. The desired result is for the unchurched to experience Christ as the church embodies the gospel message, with the result being that of assimilating these individuals into his Church through warm and inviting Simple Church gatherings. This is the organic multiplicative nature of Simple Church.

With the DNA of multiplication in the genome, exponential growth is not only possible, but probable! Some of these networks may eventually look like traditional churches currently prevalent in North America, but most will find God birthing new and unique ways to engage the culture, penetrating the cultural walls of separation and isolation as it enters into people's worlds with the gospel of the kingdom. It is an exciting day for those who embrace this primitive expression of Christianity. It is

¹⁷ Cole and Kaak, *The Organic Church Planters' Greenhouse*, 1-6.

especially exciting for those in The Evangelical Church whose roots encompass this paradigm. Christ continues to build his church, one living stone upon another.¹⁸

The Simple Church Movement in the USA

There is currently a global shift occurring in the church. The house church movement has been sweeping across many portions of the globe for years, like in China, India, Cuba, and many third world countries. What makes this movement truly global is that it is also gaining momentum in North America.

Christians gathering in homes and calling it “church” is slowly but surely gaining popularity and acceptance in North America. A motivating factor for this has been the need for healthy, basic Christian community that few have been able to experience within the larger, impersonal, traditional congregations. This simple house church phenomenon has caught the attention of the *New York Times*:

A growing number of Christians across the country are choosing a do-it-yourself worship experience in what they call a “house church.” Although the numbers for such an intentionally decentralized religious phenomenon are hard to pin down, as many as 1,600 groups in all 50 states are listed on house church Websites.¹⁹

This article goes on to state that much of its current growth is due in part to disillusioned churchgoers who are seeking a more relational and Biblical church context in which to worship. There are comments like those of Michael Wroblewski, a

¹⁸ Evidence to this statement follows in this chapter.

¹⁹ Laurie Goodstein, “Search For Right Church Ends at Home,” *The New York Times*, 29 April 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/29/national/29PRAY.html?ei=5070&en=972c9906cca69e> (accessed November 10, 2004). The actual figure is much larger than this article suggests. Being acquainted with this movement for about ten years and fully immersed in it for nearly two years, my estimate would be much larger—perhaps ten times. There are probably 1,600 on the West Coast.

mechanical engineer for the Navy who started a house church in Portsmouth RI, who stated:

We've gotten so far away from the believers who met in the first three centuries, when they were sharing one another's lives on a daily basis. You need to be interactive with the other believers, not just staring at the back of someone's head listening to a single pastor speak.²⁰

Many who are becoming part this movement want to strip faith down to its minimum. They don't want to have to support a big building and staff and insurance policies and advertising campaigns and fixing the roof, because all of that seems to them to be extraneous to what they understand a life of faith to be.

There are reasons both negative and positive why these types of congregations are growing. All of life's issues, spiritual or otherwise, are not solved by joining or planting a Simple Church. In fact, the one guarantee in this setting is that things get messier and issues become more pronounced. The benefit of Simple Church is the small number of people involved in a given congregation. The small group relational dynamic provides a mechanism for addressing the issues that surface. It is much easier for a single family to address a relational issue in contrast to several families or a neighborhood. The smallness of the community places most problems in a container that is manageable rather than problematic. The luxury of waiting to deal with a problem shrinks considerably in Simple Church. Waiting too long to deal with an issue might result in the disintegration of the community.

²⁰ Ibid.

Simple Church Networks

One positive element is the emergence of Simple Church networks appearing everywhere. This network concept invites individual congregations to thrive within a larger community. In the New Testament, we see churches that met in houses and also gathered elsewhere. But we also see the larger context of city-wide churches, for example, the church of Ephesus, the church of Philippi, etc.

The networking of Simple Church congregations is biblical and provides the following benefits:

- The fellowship together of a greater variety of Christians with a greater diversity of gifts. This type of structure allows for the leadership teams to function together across congregational and denominational lines—as they network together.
- The joint support of ministries, missions or charitable needs. In relationship with various networks in a given locality allows for ministry partnerships to develop as people share commonality to particular causes and callings.
- Community-wide and regional wide activities.²¹

This type of relational connection has the potential to affect every community in the U.S.A. In 2001, Larry Kreider predicted in his book *House Church Networks*: “Within the next ten to fifteen years, I believe these new house church networks will dot the landscape of North America just as they already do in other nations of world.”²² Neil Cole of Church Multiplication Resources shares what he is observing: “In the last two years the Lord has simultaneously and even spontaneously risen up a variety of

²¹ “House Church Basics Pt. 6: HC Networks—A Wave is Coming,” *HouseChurchBlog*, March 15, 2004, http://sojourner.typepad.com/house_church_blog/2004/03/house_church_ne.html (accessed October 10, 2004).

²² See Larry Kreider, *House Church Networks: A Church for a New Generation* (Ephrata PA: House to House Publications, 2001), 27-38.

expanding house church networks all across the country.”²³ Here are some examples of what Cole refers to:

- Jonathan Campbell leads a network of house congregations in the Seattle area and other parts of the country. He been involved in house churches for more than 15 years. He received his Ph.D. from Fuller Seminary where his focus was in house churches.
- Quest is another network of house churches in the Seattle area where Dwight Friesen provides direction. Quest refers to itself as a Christ-commons, more conventionally referred to as a church. They exist to assist people in making needed connections, connection with others and with God.²⁴ Dwight is himself connected to the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination.
- Vineyard Central in Cincinnati has transitioned from a traditional Vineyard church into an expanding network of house churches. In 2002, they went from 10 to 20 house churches. Kevin Raines and Greg Hubbard are among some of the key leaders in this movement.²⁵
- Apex Church is a network of house churches in Las Vegas and three other states. They have about 25 congregations in Las Vegas where they have been able to have significant impact among “twenty-somethings” who work in the gambling industry. They provide a large church setting once a month in a

²³ HC Networks—A Wave is Coming,” House Church Basics Pt. 6,

²⁴ See <http://www.quest.nu>.

²⁵ See <http://www.vineyardcentral.com>.

local Lutheran Church building. Joe Boyd and Greg Hubbard are providing leadership for this network.²⁶

- Summit Fellowships in Portland, Oregon is a network of house congregations. Dan and Jody Mayhew have been providing leadership for over 15 years. They are considered by some in the area as Simple Church pioneers. They are relationally networked to about eight congregations and informally connected to many others. Over the years, they have welcomed those from alternative cultures found in the city.
- Lake Shore Community Church in Vancouver, Washington has transitioned from a traditional setting to a network of house churches. Five years ago, in order for the congregation to be more relational, they left their building and began meeting in homes. Currently, they rent their facility to various congregations in the area. About once a quarter, they meet together at their old facility for gathered worship.
- The Church of the Servant King (COSK) is located in Portland, Oregon. This congregation has chosen to live in community together.²⁷ The first COSK was planted in Gardena, California over 25 years ago. Another sister congregation is located in Eugene, Oregon. A primary ministry of the COSK is to be an encouragement to the larger body of Christ by serving in various

²⁶ See <http://www.apexchurch.org>.

²⁷ There are several communal house churches that would fall within the Simple Church paradigm. The examples provided embrace the simple ecclesiological paradigm. They however would not see themselves as a Church Multiplication Movement in the same sense as what is described in this paper. The examples provided demonstrate the eclectic nature of Simple Church.

capacities. Because of this, their relationship with other congregations has grown and deepened through the years.

- Another communal fellowship is Refuge of Christ in Forest Grove, Oregon. This congregation was planted by David Miller and Andrew Mossbarger, who had been serving as student ministers on the Pacific University campus. R.O.C., as they refer to themselves, began about five years ago out of the desire to reflect Christ in an incarnational form close to the university campus. Their commitment has led them to reaching out to some of the marginalized in their community. This has included single mothers, the unemployed, and others who are looking for a place of refuge.
- In Long Beach, California is Awakening Chapels. This is a network of organic churches meeting in homes, university campuses, and coffee shops. They believe the church is more than mere buildings and structures, but it is the people of God—the Body of Christ—taking church wherever they go. This particular network has made some positive inroads into the homosexual community in Long Beach.²⁸
- In Spokane, Washington there is “The Parousia Network of House and Cell Churches.” This network is connected and actively participating with the Church of Spokane and has taken a leadership role in the Spokane Marketplace Prayer Initiative. This is a city-wide church initiative inviting God’s presence to come and transform the community.

²⁸ See <http://www.kingdomcauses.org/awakenings>.

The above examples are just a few of the many networks across North America. Other networks worthy of mention include Third Day Churches based in San Diego, California and Dove Christian Fellowship International based in Ephrata, Pennsylvania. In addition to multiple networks emerging, denominations and para-church ministries are embracing this paradigm.

Denominations and Para-Church Ministries

Denominations are starting to see the value of Simple Church congregational life. Assembly of God, Southern Baptist, and the Friends Church are some of the denominations actively involved in planting simple house churches and networks.

The Free Methodist Church of Canada is sponsoring house church planting efforts in two provinces: British Columbia and Ontario.²⁹ The Foursquare Church of Canada is the first denomination to appoint a director dedicated to overseeing house churches.³⁰ The Navigators, a well-respected international organization with years of small group experience, is also considering developing a house church wing to its ministry in Canada.³¹

Southern Baptists

“While the Southern Baptists have always had a major emphasis on planting churches,” Rev. Kenny Moore said in a recent DAWN REPORT interview, “the time has

²⁹ Zdero, 75. See also The Free Methodist Church in Canada, <http://www.fmc-canada.org>.

³⁰ The Foursquare Gospel Church in Canada, <http://www.foursquare.ca/hbcn.htm>.

³¹ Zdero, 75.

come for a shift in gears. The question we are now exploring goes something like this: What would it take for everybody on the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains to hear the gospel, have an opportunity to respond, be drawn into a biblical community, be discipled and have an opportunity to worship God?" He goes on to state, "Where we have shifted gears in the last few years is to really think in terms not just of adding a few churches, but how we can literally multiply churches."³² Moore believes that the answer to the question, at least in the Denver area where he serves, requires a major paradigm shift in thinking. The truth of the current situation is that traditional churches with their event, building and professional clergy orientation simply cannot accomplish this goal. Yet that is where most of our material and energy resources are directed.

Southern Baptists are now thinking of church plants that will utilize men and women to be shepherds in the market place and in neighborhoods. Gatherings can take place in schools, parks, Starbucks, and apartment complexes. The goal is to develop relational-based churches which do all the functions of fellowship, worship, prayer, and ministry. This realistically describes the Simple Church model, but emphasizes that thinking organically includes all kinds of relational-based churches.

Northwest Yearly Meeting Of The Friends

The Northwest Yearly Meeting of the Friends is heavily involved in multiplying house churches, the major focus of their church planting endeavors. They call this New

³² "Southern Baptists Considering Shift in Church-Planting Concept," Simple Church, Dawn Ministries, <http://www.dawnministries.org/downloads/northamericanresources/Archives/Southern%20Baptists%20considering%20shift%20in%20church.doc>.

Works Church Planting. The formation of New Works evolved from conversations among district leaders including the District Superintendent, Council of Elders, Board of Evangelism, and Director of New Church Development, addressing their concerns regarding the longstanding church decline within their district. This resulted in leaders and church planters who were moving with fresh vision from God, dedicated to rediscovering and cooperating with God's Spirit in the establishment of the re-emerging church.³³ Their focus was to multiply simple congregations across the Pacific Northwest using leadership associated with or connected to the market place. In many cases, this involves individuals who are bi-vocational or possessing tent-making skills. Currently, there are 15 healthy congregations in the process of multiplying themselves, which has transpired over the last five years.³⁴

A Simple Church Worship Expression

What happens in a house church meeting? First Corinthians 14:26, written to a house church, offers a good outline. Each participant comes to the meeting with the intent of sharing something to build up others: songs, teaching, encouragement, or food. In the process, entering into one another's lives through their joys and sorrows, the confession of sin, prayer for the weak and sick, and the worship of the ever present Christ feeds hungry souls. Participants meditate on Scripture, silently wait on the Lord, and share what God wants to speak. Kids, grandpas, and cats and dogs all mingle in a holy

³³ The Northwest Yearly Meeting, <http://www.nwfriends.org/NewWorks>.

³⁴ John Macy, Director of New Works for the Northwest Yearly Meeting of the Friends, interviewed by author, conversation, Newberg, OR., July 25, 2005. See <http://www.nwfriends.org/NewWorks/NewWorks.html>. Healthy congregations would be considered those communities that are loving God, loving their neighbors with a missional focus to extend God's kingdom.

sense of wonderment that God would so graciously visit them in such a unique and special way. People leave and tell their neighbors; more come, new leaders emerge, the group divides and multiplies—sometimes within a few months, sometimes in a year or two.

Simple Church congregations meet with some measure of regularity and consistency. This could mean gathering together on a monthly, weekly, or semi-weekly basis with the purpose of being together. Some have dubbed this time “the family reunion.”³⁵ During this time, a variety of things occur. Like most family reunions, food is part of the gathering. Members congregate around the table to share a meal and their lives with one another.

On these occasions, members are comforted who may recently have lost a loved one, gotten an important job, suffer with cancer or depression, or experienced failure, breakdowns, or disappointments. “That is what we want to do as a faith community—we pat the back, raise the spirits, or give a comforting word to the suffering, the lonely, and the downhearted. In that way we become family.”³⁶ In addition, there are family members embracing those they have known for some time and others they have just met.

In this context, there is worship in song and praise, fellowship, study, and prayer. Like families, all in attendance are encouraged and expected to contribute and participate. The structure is loosely patterned following the guidelines Paul gave to the Corinthians: “when you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a

³⁵ Renchi Arce, “The Family Reunion: A Metaphor for Church Gatherings,” <http://www.allelon.org/articles/print.cfm?id=156> (accessed December 15, 2004).

³⁶ Ibid.

tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.”³⁷ As those present participate by contributing through their unique and individual gifting, the Spirit fashions the community in Christ's image.

Epic Wineskins — Simple Church Gathered Worship Scenario

Here is a scenario of a congregational gathering that has been meeting once a week under my general direction for over two years. Around 5:15 p.m., Noah and Cori arrive with their sons Devin and Jeffrey at the Morris residence. Brent and Melissa are close behind with their three kids. For a few minutes, everyone is unloading the food and goodies they've brought for the shared meal. While unpacking these items and catching up on Cori's latest doctor appointment, Brent and Noah make their way to the garage to retrieve the folding tables needed for the meal and teaching time that will take place later on. Rob, Linda, and Barbara enter carrying an enormous pot of chili, the main dish for this particular evening. A few minutes later, Fred and Margaret arrive and immediately Margaret begins instructing everyone on what needs to transpire in order to start on time. Joje is the next to arrive and immediately converges on the children with hugs and kisses all around. Margaret, completely involved in the meal preparation, has enlisted Mike and Lisa to help. In time, the Au family arrives, all six members, Jim and Trudy and their children Vivian, Madelaine, Clarissa, and Daniel. Just minutes behind them are Bob, Bill, and Opal.

It is 5:30 p.m. and everyone present gathers in a circle holding hands for prayer. Tonight, Rob asks if one of the children wants to pray and thank the Lord for the meal.

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 14:26.

Devin, who is six years old, volunteers and after several prolonged moments begins, "Dear Jesus, thank you for everything. You are good and helped me in school this week. Be with us all here tonight and bless the food we will eat..... and bless everyone around the world. Amen!" For the next 45 minutes, everyone sits together sharing their stories from the past week as they consume chili. Someone asks, "Does anyone have some good news?" The question initiates a mid-level of continual conversation among the members. A bit later, when everyone has finished eating, several individuals begin cleaning up and putting things away.

This is followed by an announcement that it is time to circle up for gathered worship. Kids are included for the first part and occasionally for the entire time together. Eventually, everyone gathers together and Noah spontaneously leads out in a song, *Here I Am To Worship*. In just moments, everyone has joined him in song. With the song concluded, Rob asks Mike to open the time in prayer giving a special invitation for Christ to be present and real as they are together.

This is followed by someone sharing good news and a prayer request. Everyone is encouraged to participate. Drew asks for prayer for his friend at school who needs a winter coat. His family is poor and doesn't have the money to buy him one. Barbara, sensing the Spirit's leading, begins to pray for Drew's request; several others agree with her. Following Barbara's prayer, Noah leads in another couple of praise choruses, then these are followed by a few more prayer requests. Before the children are dismissed into Joje's care, time is taken to pray for each child, asking that God's Spirit become more real to them and allow them to be good and attentive for Joje tonight.

After the children leave, Mike shares about what he is learning in Ephesians 1 and how that has encouraged him to be more faithful. For him, he sees all three members of the Trinity working together in his life. Following Mike's words, others share concerning what they feel the Spirit is doing in and through them. Bob, who might lose his job, wants to be more faithful rather than fearful. Then others share concerning their journey in this area. This leads to a time of getting into the Scriptures concerning fear and faith and the anticipation of the new week ahead. From time to time, someone spontaneously prays for another person in the gathering and for themselves. An hour passes, which feels more like fifteen minutes, and the kids upstairs are getting restless, as the noise level verifies this reality.

It is suggested by someone in the group that they spend some time praying. Everyone breaks into face-to-face two's to pray for one another and the upcoming week. As the prayer is winding down, Jim leads out in the hymn, *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. As each group finishes, they join in, which leads to several more choruses. As the gathered worship time draws to a close, Opal offers the benediction.

The children rejoin everyone and housekeeping and calendar issues are discussed. Announcements are made concerning the upcoming opportunity to serve at City Team's Annual Christmas Dinner for the homeless and the Northwatch worship gathering with other congregations in the area the last Sunday of the month. Cori's baby is due in two weeks—so everyone needs to be looking as to how they will serve her and the family following the baby's arrival. It is now 8:15 p.m. and people begin packing up to head home. Rob proposes to present the “one another” teaching he had prepared for tonight

next week. Each person has experienced another wonderful opportunity to be together once again.

The members of Epic Wineskins are becoming more and more excited about living the Christian life, maturing, and helping each other to mature in this simple form of community. They have become intent on spending daily time with the Lord and with each other once a week. They are determined to share what they see God doing in their lives and what their responses to his work of formation are. This has become a group adventure in becoming the Spirit's formation chamber, not just something else to squeeze into each person's busy schedules, but a priority that shapes their very lives.

As they practice sharing the Scriptures that impact their lives, without effort and even without realizing it, they are instructing each other in words of life and being changed by what they read. In addition, as they are listening to and praying for one another, they give grace and affirmation to one another.

In this scenario Rob, Linda, Mike, and Barbara are the recognized leaders of this Christ-community and as such, they serve the congregation in the role of spiritual parents. Each leader possesses one or more ministry gifts and acts as a local elder. Rob functions as an apostle, prophet, and teacher, and Mike in the roles of pastor and teacher. Linda functions with a pastoral gift and Barbara with evangelist and pastoral gifting. Together with others in the congregation, they are focused as a community on being the Spirit's formation chamber, allowing Him freedom to cultivate and fashion them into the image and likeness of Christ.

Conclusion

Presently, the Simple House Church movement is sweeping across North America as people from all walks of life find this ecclesiological dynamic to their liking. Something new is stirring in the church. "A significant movement of energy, shape, and spirit is under way. This shift is not only breathing new life into the church but is also altering its center of gravity."³⁸ This movement is defined by several as Simple House Church, a paradigm that embraces the organic simplicity of the Early Church. It is an ecclesiological expression presently being investigated by some and wholeheartedly embraced by others, in local church, denominational, and para-church settings. Both the historical and contemporary contexts validate the notion that it is time for the Western church to seriously consider its appropriateness for our time. "To envision the church of the future we must recall the church at its beginning: we are looking for 'the once and future church' in order to develop a new paradigm we so desperately need."³⁹

³⁸ Robert and Julia Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 1.

³⁹ Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church: Reinventing the Congregation for a New Mission Frontier* (Washington: Alban Institute, 1991), 6.

Chapter 5 — SIMPLE CHURCH SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND LEADERSHIP



Poised at the millennium we confront two critical challenges: how to address deep problems for what hierarchical leadership alone is insufficient and how to harness the intelligence and spirit of people at all levels of an organization to continually build and share knowledge. Our responses may lead us, ironically, to a future based on more ancient—and more natural—ways of organizing: communities of diverse and effective leaders who empower their organizations to learn with head, heart, and hand.

Peter Senge, Author of *The Fifth Discipline*

God is not just saving individuals and preparing them for heaven; rather, he is creating a people among whom he can live and who in their life together will reproduce God's life and character.¹

This chapter considers spiritual formation and leadership in the Simple Church context. There are three participants functioning in symbiotic simultaneity in the spiritual formation process. The first participant is the Holy Spirit of God, as the primary leader of the Church and third person of the Trinity sent by the Son and given by the

¹ Gordon Fee, Paul, *The Spirit and the People of God* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 66.

Father, who is resident in the Church, with instructions to guide and care for it.² The second participant is the leadership structure cast in the form of the fivefold ministry gifts recorded in Ephesians 4, forming a parenting team for the community. The third is the community, or congregation, working in unison with the Spirit and the fivefold leadership team, and becomes the Spirit's "Formation Chamber."³

This chapter will describe the Spirit's work of formation in partnership with the leadership and community. Due to the intimate relationship between the Spirit and congregation, these two will be addressed together first, followed by an examination of Simple Church leadership and its organic nature. First, it is necessary for us to look at two premises of Simple Church life which are foundational to all aspects of spiritual formation. Without these foundations, the organic nature of this paradigm becomes non-existent. These are essentials that characterize Simple Church as distinct from institutional church forms.

THE SPIRIT

Premise One—A People for Himself

The first premise is that spiritual formation in biblical terms is more about shaping a people than shaping individuals. This is extremely difficult to grasp for those formed and shaped by a highly individualistic North American Church culture. There must be a transition from an individual mindset to a communal understanding of both the

² John 14:15-17; 15:8-15; 1 Corinthians 2:10-13.

³ Alan Creech, "Answers from The Other Side," *Next-Wave Church & Culture*, April 2004, <http://www.the-next-wave.org/stories/storyReader#273> (accessed October 10, 2004). Alan seems to have coined this term "formation chamber," in reference to small Christ-communities the Holy Spirit uses as bases of operations.

Church and Scripture. “The community-forming activity of the Holy Spirit challenges us to move beyond the contemporary assumption that the Spirit’s actions center exclusively, or even primarily, on the individual soul.”⁴ This is not to suggest that God is not interested in individuals or is in the practice of sidestepping or traversing around them, but His primary focus is the spiritual formation of Christ communities. In responding to Christ’s invitation to follow him, a believer shifts paradigms. In the previous paradigm before Christ, life was all about the individual. In the new paradigm after Christ, life becomes all about others. God himself is our example: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son.”⁵ For many believers, this kingdom reality is verbalized but often lacking in practice.

Premise Two—Formation Occurs in Community

The second foundational premise automatically follows. The Spirit’s formation of God’s people *nearly always* occurs in the context of the relational community, or church. The Spirit’s forming and shaping of the individual is *nearly always* with the larger community in mind.⁶ In the contemporary North American Church, individualism rules, causing a spiritual disability that impedes our willingness to embrace the benefits of community. Americans are born not into a culture of community but one of individualism. Because of this, there is difficulty conceptualizing an alternative society—one based on community. “Contemporary categories, presuppositions, and

⁴ Darrell L. Guder, Editor, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 142-143.

⁵ John 3:16.

⁶ Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:7; 14-26; Ephesians 2:21; 4:16.

experiences have largely blinded us to the radical nature of the biblical sense of community that the Spirit brings.”⁷

In *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, Gordon Fee provides a scenario illustrating the individualism that pervades church culture:

A single person is sitting at home in front of the TV watching a Christian broadcast as a sermon is preached and an invitation extended. The person responds by “accepting Christ.” But the only “church” this person attends is via the TV, without connection to a local body of believers.⁸

Fee asks the question: “Is this person saved?” And his answer is: “Only God knows; but such salvation lies totally outside the New Testament frame of reference.”⁹ In a footnote, he goes on to explain that he receives considerable opposition for this view, especially from some who quote Romans 10:9, “that if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” This text, however, presupposes a Christian community in place where such confession occurs, or at the very least upon baptism. “The earliest Christians would not have understood a believer whose salvation had not been completed by baptism, which includes identification with both Christ and his people.”¹⁰

The Early Church understood that a response to the call to come and follow Jesus also included a decision to make their Christ community the center of their lives, even to the abandonment of other social structures. Yale University professor Wayne Meeks makes this point, based on his careful study of the Early Church: “To be ‘baptized into

⁷ Guder, 145.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gordon Fee, *Paul, the Spirit and the People of God*, 72.

Jesus Christ' signaled for Pauline converts an extraordinary thoroughgoing resocialization, in which the sect was intended to become virtually the primary group for its members, supplanting all other loyalties."¹¹ The experience of authentic community is found in a distinct and peculiar culture nurturing social relationships that embody the reconciling and healing purposes of God to be fulfilled by the Church.

In understanding the Spirit's work, the emphasis must be placed on the community in contrast to the individual. Therefore, God's Spirit is about shaping cultures—people groups and communities—yet that may require one person at a time. The organic nature of Simple Church does not make provision for an individual to experience the Spirit's shaping ministry without impacting the entire community to the same degree.¹² This is crucial in understanding the Spirit's role of formation. As Stanley Grenz notes, "The church is a special people, a people whom the Spirit is forming together into a community."¹³ Without these premises in place, the communal nature of the Spirit's work is stunted, crippling one's biblical understanding of the Spirit and the essence of the Godhead.¹⁴

¹¹ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 78.

¹² Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 2:14-15.

¹³ Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 207.

¹⁴ The Godhead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the original community modeling perfect community for humanity. See Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming The Local Church as Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 16-19.

THE COMMUNITY

The Spirit's Presence

The Early Church spoke of the reality of God's reign in terms of the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit. The role of the Spirit is to form a loving community: "to create a people for God's name, who bear God's likeness in their character, as that is seen in behavior."¹⁵ This is more than simple human virtues; the fruit of the Spirit is that of bearing fruit in and through the believing Christ community's witness to that which characterizes God as revealed in Jesus Christ. As John Howard Yoder suggests:

The church is God's people gathered as a unit, as a people, gathered to do business in His name, to find what it means here and now to put into practice this different quality of life which is God's promise to them and to the world and their promise to God and service to the world.¹⁶

In Simple Church, congregations become formation chambers for God's Spirit. These congregations shaped by the Spirit become workstations, i.e. households, providing a platform in which He cultivates human hearts in the ordinary ebb and flow of congregational life. These Simple Churches are usually a tightly connected group of 5-20 people who are committed to one another for the duration and distance of the spiritual journey called life.

The small size of a Simple Church reinforces an environment of full participation of all members exercising their spiritual gifts. Each believer receives at least one spiritual gift (*charisma*) for the benefit of the other believers within the Simple Church

¹⁵ Gordon Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 370.

¹⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution: Essays on Christian Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1977), 30-31.

community.¹⁷ But not all have the same gifts, and some have been granted more gifts than others.¹⁸ These gifts are not distributed equally by the Spirit, but as He wills. At gathered worship times, Simple Church members are encouraged to exercise their gifts, believing that in the group there exists intricate connection between each member.¹⁹ The exercise of these gifts occurs at individual (one-on-one) and corporate levels, depending on the group dynamics of those gathered and the situations that emerge in communal life. In referring to this type of congregational dynamic, Ray Stedman coined the term “body life.”²⁰ In this environment, the Spirit is given opportunity to form and fashion a spiritual community of Christ-followers. The community becomes the Spirit’s “formation chamber,” which patterns itself like a family.

The Formation Chamber: A Family

To help clarify the Spirit’s role in forming organic Simple Churches, let us consider what they might look like. Consider a healthy family unit with a father, mother, and children in addition to some extended members. In this family, each member is relationally connected with others—extended family members, friends, work relationships, and any other relationships in one’s *oikos*. This becomes the Spirit’s formation chamber, much like the Early Church’s household structure. It is comprised

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 12:7, 11; Romans 12:3; Ephesians 4:7.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 12:29-30; Romans 12:3; Ephesians 4:11.

¹⁹ When considering the exercise of spiritual gifts in Simple Church, there is a corresponding emphasis to include all the gifts, not just those that are verbal (Prophecy, Teaching, Tongues etc.), but what might be termed the more relational gifts (mercy, encouragement, hospitality, leadership, etc.).

²⁰ See Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1972).

of a group of believers who meet on a regular basis. These small group gatherings emerge as spiritual families wherever the “center of gravity” of life happens to be.

Members of a Simple Church perceive themselves as family, which is a key component to its organic nature. They feel connected to one another and intentionally practice the “one another” passages in the New Testament.²¹ They understand their responsibilities and commitments to each other; time together is not extra-curricular but instead is crucial to their spiritual formation. They are full participants within the group and know that if the congregation is going to realize its potential, it should not rely on professionals to do kingdom ministry. Intrinsicly, there is within the group the realization that everyone is functionally qualified for service and ministry.

LEADERSHIP

Spiritual Fathers and Mothers

Understanding Simple Church as a family suggests the need for some type of parental direction. “God’s intention is to raise up spiritual parents who are willing to nurture spiritual children and help them grow up in their Christian lives.”²² This is a fulfillment of the Lord’s promise to “turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers...”²³ The Lord wants to restore harmony among fathers and their children, both naturally and spiritually, so that fathers can freely impart

²¹ See Appendix D: “The New Testament One Anothers.”

²² Larry Kreider, *The Cry for Spiritual Fathers and Mothers: Compelling Vision for Authentic, Nurturing, Relationships within Today’s Church* (Ephrata, PA: House to House Publications, 2000), 3.

²³ Malachi 4:6.

spiritual wisdom and knowledge to the next generation. While confronting Zechariah concerning the son that would be born to him in his old age, the angel Gabriel said,

He will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.²⁴

In prophetic terms, these passages from Malachi and Luke speak of God's intention to reclaim the family connections he designed for humanity and specifically his people. In a time when our culture is seeking answers, the Simple Church family formation chamber holds wonderful potential for modeling healthy parenting, both in physical and spiritual terms.

The Heart of the Father

The "heart of the Father" ought to be the characteristic that marks organic leadership. From Scripture, ideal leadership seems to be this expressed concept of "the apostle who is a father," or "the leader who is a parent." This leadership model is different from a hierarchical form or structure.

It is the blessing of a father that is irreplaceable in the life of those who will lead the church in the next move of God. I pray this would become the heart of leadership in the Church in America.²⁵

Nowhere in the New Testament is the Father's heart more pronounced than in Luke 1:11-32, the parable of the lost son. In verse 20, the father's heart is revealed in these words: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled

²⁴ Luke 1:17.

²⁵ Dawn Ministries, "The Apostle Who Is A Father," *Leadership*, http://www.dawnministries.org/regions/nam/simplechurch/leadership/new_apostles.html (accessed March 24, 2004).

with compassion for him: he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” The father longed for reconciliation with his son and, seeing his son in the distance, he ran to him. God longs for this type of leadership in the Church, especially the suffering this father willingly endured on behalf of his son. “The heart of apostolic service is a willingness to suffer for Christ and for his people.”²⁶ Pragmatically, this type of leadership enables the practical elements of Simple Church life to function. With the fatherless generation that populates much of our society, this type of leadership is welcomed among those within the emerging culture with the potential to reclaim the family connections unavailable to so many.

The Reclamation of Family Connections

There is a need in society today to reclaim spiritual roots and family. Oprah Winfrey daily invites people to share their stories of redemption and rediscovery of spiritual values and the relationships that help them connect in a disconnected world. Humanity is begging for authentic relationships, in the church and in the world. Parents want their children to seek spiritual guidance and find protection in successful relationships so they don’t have to face an increasingly hostile world alone.

In response to this, the Simple Church family formation chamber places the young and old together in order to facilitate an ongoing spiritual legacy. The imparting of spiritual fatherhood fills the void and closes the gap of broken relationships between the generations, as all formation occurs in relational connection with others in the Simple Church. Rather than encouraging involvement in activities, one is encouraged to build

²⁶ Len Hjalmanson, “The New Apostles,” <http://nextreformation.com/html/general/apostles-1.htm> (accessed April 23, 2003).

relationships from which spiritual growth will occur. The usual institutional church practice is described by Larry Kreider: “[A] Christian believer is encouraged to participate in church services, Bible studies, para-church organizations or evangelistic ministry in order to bolster his faith and ‘grow strong in the Lord.’”²⁷ The present theory holds that the more teaching from God’s Word and interaction with believers, the more spiritually mature he or she will become. These involvements are important, but this faulty assumption leads to digesting more and more information in order to fill a void of authentic relationship. At times, a new believer “does not know how to meaningfully and sacrificially impart his life to others because he has never been properly fathered. Without a role model, he remains a spiritual infant, needing to be spoon-fed by his pastor or other Christian worker.”²⁸

Paul warned the Corinthians not to overlook the need to make lasting spiritual investments in others’ lives as spiritual fathers. “For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me.”²⁹ The Greek word for *instructor* is *pedagogues*, referring to those who conducted children to school, and who superintended their conduct away from school hours. It refers to those individuals charged with the care of children, or teachers in general, and then applied to instructors of any kind.³⁰

²⁷ Kreider, *The Cry for Spiritual Mothers and Fathers*, 4.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ 1 Corinthians 4:15-16, NKJV.

³⁰ *Barnes Notes, Electronic Database* (Seattle: Biblesoft, Inc. 1997, 2003). See notes on 1 Corinthians 1:15.

Since the time Paul had brought these Corinthians to faith in Christ, many instructors had subsequently taught God's Word to them. They had listened to these instructors, faithfully attending worship gatherings, but became arrogant in their knowledge of the gospel.³¹ "They were proud of what they knew, but they were immature as believers because they lacked true fathers to give them an identity and proper training and nurturing."³² In I Corinthians 4:16, he admonishes them to "imitate him." In other words, he urges them to "become spiritual fathers to those who follow you."

Paul modeled spiritual fathering by informing the Corinthians in verse 17 he was going to send Timothy to them because he would "remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus." As a spiritual father, Paul had trained Timothy. Timothy was ready to impart his spiritual fatherhood to the Corinthian church. In Simple Church, believers are able to see spiritual fathering modeled so they can be equipped to pass on the legacy to the next generation.³³ From an organic perspective, the goal is that spiritual parenting be ongoing and natural, as spiritual children are brought to adulthood in a loving, caring family environment, similar to a normal, healthy family structure.

Paul characterizes apostolic ministry as parenting. Not only did he consider himself a father in Christ, but he continually demonstrates this characteristic in his appeals. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he shares his concern for them as their

³¹ 1 Corinthians 4:18.

³² Kreider, *The Cry for Spiritual Mothers and Fathers*, 5.

³³ The term "spiritual fathering" is synonymous with spiritual mothering. The egalitarian nature of organic ecclesiology encourages both genders participation in the spiritual nurturing and parenting of God's household. Like natural families, spiritual parenting in best case scenarios involves both mother and father parenting together.

parent. Not wanting to burden them in anyway, he states: “After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well” (2 Corinthians 12:14-15). To the Thessalonians, he is a father dealing with his children by “encouraging, comforting, urging them to live lives worthy of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:11). Paul gives us understanding into church leadership and apostolic authority and how it is to be exercised in the context of community. The community has at its essence the DNA for spiritual formation.

DNA Components

In Chapter Two, the four organic qualities of simplicity, complexity, biotic potential, and self-organization were introduced to describe the essence and nature of Simple Church. As Neil Cole expresses it, “all living things have a specific and unique DNA.”³⁴ We believe the following to be the Church’s DNA:

1. **Divine Truth:** truth is a foundation for everything. By Divine Truth we mean the dynamic and living presence of Christ and His Word.
2. **Nourishing Relationships:** healthy relationships are what make up a family. Love one another is to be constant pursuit of the family of God. This is the most basic of Christ’s commands.
3. **Apostolic Mission:** just as Jesus was sent on a mission, so we are also sent out on mission for him. Our mission is to go into the world and disciple the nations for their good and God’s glory.³⁵

These three pieces continuously function together resulting in the formation of the missional purpose of the church. It is the divine truth of the Word of God and the living

³⁴ Cole and Kaak, 1-7.

³⁵ Ibid.

presence of Christ that informs and guides the community. The nourishing relationships are the context in which formation occurs, and apostolic mission is the result.

This DNA is reinforced and illustrated in the spiritual formation of the Early Church as they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”³⁶ First, the church devoted itself to the divine truth of the apostles’ teaching from God’s Word. Second, they devoted themselves “to the fellowship,” which entailed the nurturing of relationships in the context of their Christ communities, working out the apostolic teaching of the apostles. Third, they devoted themselves to “the breaking of bread” as they remembered Christ’s presence and words while he was with them on earth; later his continued presence in the person of the Holy Spirit formed and fashioned them into his community. Fourth, they devoted themselves “to prayer” which kept alive their relationship with God and one another.

In an effort to maintain simplicity, apostolic teaching begins with the Basic Commands of Christ. Jesus taught many things which can be grouped under seven basic commands. In Acts 2:37-47, we find the 3,000 converts of the first New Testament body of believers obeying *all seven* of them in their basic form. These are the foundation upon which Simple Church builds all teaching and training of its disciples. Patterson and Scoggins summarize them:

- 1. Repent, believe, and receive the Holy Spirit** (conversion, regeneration), Mark 1:15; John 3:16; 20:22
- 2. Be baptized** and live the new life it initiates, initiating ongoing transformation, Matthew 28:18-20

³⁶ Acts 2:42.

3. **Love** God, neighbor, fellow disciples, the needy in a practical way and enemies (forgive), Matthew 22:36-40; John 13:34-35, Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 5:43-48

4. **Break bread** (Communion, related to all that we do to worship), Matthew 26:26-28; John 4:24

5. **Pray** (private and family devotions, intercession and spiritual warfare), John 16:24

6. **Give** (stewardship of our time, treasure and talents), Luke 6:38

7. **Make disciples** (witness for Christ, shepherd, apply the Word, train leaders, send missionaries), Matthew 28:18-20³⁷

This is a beginning phase in bringing new believers toward full maturity. Let us now turn our attention to a more thorough understanding of Simple Church leadership.

Leadership Synthesis

As the Spirit shapes the Simple Church, the primary task of leadership is not so much to lead as it is to “build a foundation—a place for the walls to rest.”³⁸ Leadership in the organic paradigm facilitates the Spirit’s work of formation, and therefore it is crucial that it pattern itself after the style and function of the Holy Spirit. Given the crucial nature of leadership and its potential for kingdom impact, either negative or positive, it is important that it be a leadership that empowers rather than exploits.

The fivefold ministry of Ephesians 4:1-16 is the relevant leadership model for Simple Church. This includes apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, which

³⁷ George Patterson and Richard Scoggins, *Church Multiplication Guide: The Miracle of Church Multiplication* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), 22.

³⁸ Hjalmarson, “The New Apostles.”

some within the emerging church have termed an APEPT team.³⁹ Missing in this model are strategic planning and organizational charts common with more hierarchical forms. Simple Church leadership starts from a place different than that of traditional church paradigms.

Leadership Paradigm Starting Points

The lens through which one views the essential nature of the Church, institutional or organic, leads to divergent ecclesiological conceptions, specifically in regard to leadership. The bifurcation between the institutional and organic paradigms is pronounced when considering this issue. This divergence occurs at the outset by perceiving leadership emerging from two different starting points. Figure 5.1 illustrates these distinct starting points and some of the results of each paradigm.

Figure 5.1 Church Leadership Hypothesis

Simple Church	Institution
1. Starting point: The body of Christ.	1. Starting point: Leadership offices in the church. The true church is found where (a) the Word of God is rightly proclaimed; (b) the sacraments are rightly administered.
2. Bottom up: The church's ministry is shaped by the gifts and callings distributed by the Holy Spirit to the whole body of Christ.	2. Top-down: The ministry is the province of the ordained offices of the church.
3. All ministry is lay ministry.	3. Lay ministry supplements and is secondary to ordained ministry.
4. Conclusion: One people/one ministry.	4. Conclusion: Two people (clergy/laity). ⁴⁰

³⁹ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 165-182. The authors use the APEPT acrostic to reference the fivefold ministry of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. For the remainder of this paper, this acrostic will be used to refer to the fivefold ministry described in Ephesians 4.

⁴⁰ Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning Ministry to the People of God*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 76.

Normal hierarchical church structure involves individuals who fulfill two specific roles, usually resulting in two types of ministry, namely clergy and laity. Howard Snyder defines ‘hierarchical’ at its essential level as “a vertical structure of at least three levels. Primary authority resides at the top, and each descending level is under the authority of the higher levels. Position in the hierarchy corresponds to rank within the whole.”⁴¹ From an organic perspective, the people of God are one people and, therefore, one ministry level. Ecology is not hierarchy, because the principle of self-organization is not a vertical graduation, but one that evolves from a horizontal level. “An organic view of ministry begins with the people of God as the place where ministry resides, and it conceives of leadership from within the body.”⁴² The image is not that of a vertical line, but a circle, not a pyramid, but a network or a living organism, which is entirely descriptive of an APEPT team. In contrast, an institutional view of leadership places ministry within the confines of an ordained clergy and attempts to add on the role of lay ministry.

APEPT leadership is understood to be non-hierarchical in structure, or using another term, in an “*heirarchical*” arrangement.⁴³ This term is taken from Paul’s words to the Romans, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Snyder, *Decoding the Church*, 107.

⁴² Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business*, 75.

⁴³ This term “*heirarchical*” has been coined by Dan Mayhew, who oversees Summit Fellowships, a Simple Church network in Portland, Oregon; italics are mine.

⁴⁴ Romans 8:17.

If we are co-heirs with Christ, would it not be appropriate to assume that we are also heirs with other members of the Church? Jesus alone is head of his Church. With Jesus as the head of his church, the modern clergy/laity distinctions are understood to be unnecessary.

Jesus teaches against hierarchy at the last supper. He uses the last hours of his earthly ministry to teach something the opposite—servant leadership:

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.⁴⁵

From Luke's perspective, Jesus speaks to the issue of titles and servant leadership as the main feature for all who desire to lead.

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.⁴⁶

Jesus contradicted all other models of influence and self-importance. "The one who makes the towel his or her badge is not the one who maneuvers for a place in the power structures of life."⁴⁷ Jesus' intention was to impart a particular leadership model to his Church which could be implemented only through service. The leadership issue for Christ's Church is one of servanthood, which is not mirrored in secular society. In God's kingdom, the call is for an entirely new model, not merely a new definition. The

⁴⁵ John 13:3-5.

⁴⁶ Luke 22:25-26, *NASU*.

⁴⁷ Del Birkey, *The House Church: A Model for Renewing the Church* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1998), 87.

Early Church understood this dynamic. R. Paul Stevens, Associate Professor of Applied Theology at Regent College, states:

The Church in the New Testament has no “lay people” in the usual sense of that word, and is full of “clergy” in the true sense of that word. A biblical theology of the laity must communicate this. The church as a whole is the true ministerium, a community of prophets, priests, and princes/princesses serving God through Jesus in the power of the Spirit seven days a week. All are clergy in the sense of being appointed by God to service and dignified as God’s inheritance. All are laity in the sense of having their identity rooted in the people of God. All give ministry. All receive ministry. That is the constitution of the church.

Not surprising, few business people, for example, think of themselves as full-time ministers in the marketplace. Fewer still are encouraged in this by their churches. Hardly anyone gets commissioned to their service in the world. Christians in the first century would have found such a state of affairs anachronistic—a throw-back to the situation before Christ came when only a few in Israel knew the Lord, when only one tribe was named as priests, when only a select few heard the call of God on their lives. *Nothing but a Copernican revolution of the mind and heart can change this heretical state of affairs.*⁴⁸

The New Testament pattern of leadership allows for no institutional distinction between clergy and laity. The people of God comprise all Christians exercising their spiritual gifts in the work of ministry. To be biblical, all Christians are lay people—God’s people—and all are ministers.

The Priesthood of all Believers

Simple Church leadership emerges out of the “priesthood of all believers” as one people in one ministry. “For the people of God to enter fully into their ministry, we must come to see that there is only one people and one ministry, not two people—clergy and

⁴⁸ R. Paul Stevens, Associate Professor of Applied Theology, *Vocation, Work & Ministry Resource Binder*, An Educational Initiatives Publication (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College, 1996), 11-12.

laity—a view that inevitably leads to two ministries.”⁴⁹ In the Early Church, the professional and non-professional distinctions of the priesthood of all believers were absent. “To be a Christian is to be a minister. To be a disciple of Jesus is to engage in completing the work Jesus began. To be a member of the body is to have a function, a ministry, in the body.”⁵⁰

The preface to organic ecclesiology is this: Jesus is Lord and Head of his Church. With this perception in place, it enables leadership to advance a flat structure. In this process, “the various tasks are not executed by people within a hierarchy, but by people uniquely gifted for a special ministry relating to each other as redeemed friends and submitting themselves to each other.”⁵¹ In the Early Church, equality was the order of the day—no one person was more important than another.⁵² Each member was simply to fulfill their *function* according to their spiritual gifting.

Simple Church Leadership

In the Simple Church, congregations are organically maintained and multiplied through the ministry of three types of specially gifted people.⁵³ The functions and responsibilities of these people are elaborated by Wolfgang Simson:

⁴⁹ Ogden, *The New Reformation*, 56.

⁵⁰ Snyder, *Decoding the Church*, 91.

⁵¹ Simson, 143.

⁵² 1 Corinthians 12:21-25; Acts 6:15.

⁵³ Not all Simple Churches adopt the following leadership structure. Leadership structure and polity within Simple Churches are as diverse as that found in more traditional/institutional structures. There are several independent groups that reject any and all leadership structures. The following from Wolfgang Simson is included here because it is the form we at Epic Wineskins have chosen to adopt.

1. **Elders:** The house churches are led by elders whose function is to father and mother the church. They bring redeemed wisdom to the church, overseeing the flock like a father overseeing his children, showing them how to live, as they manifest authenticity through a proven track record and balanced and mature lifestyle.⁵⁴
2. **Fifold Minister:** The elders are constantly equipped and trained by people who have been called by God for one of the fivefold ministries, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. These ministers circulate within the house churches 'from house to house' and function as a spiritual blood-circulation system nurturing all house churches with the elements necessary to become or remain healthy and therefore multiply. These ministries are like ligaments and joints, linking the various house churches together to be a whole system. Their ministry transcends the individual house church and serves the body of Christ like a spiritual gene-pool, which the house churches of an area or a region, and sometimes beyond, can draw upon.
3. **Apostolic Fathers:** Those spiritual equippers of the fivefold ministry are people with an apostolic or prophetic gifting plus a special calling and charisma from God for a city, a region, or a nation.⁵⁵

In the Simple Church, leaders function individually but also in simultaneity as participants of a team. Interdependence among leaders is the rule due to the symbiotic nature of the team.

Organic Interdependence

In the Simple Church, the APEPT team usually provides leadership for an interdependent network of congregations. The network is a self-regulating cluster of Simple Church Christ communities. The diverse parts of this leadership team are symbiotic in nature, just as the four organic components of simplicity, complexity, biotic potential, and self-organization function symbiotically as well. This translates into all the

⁵⁴ Elders function in a shepherding (pastoring) role for individual Simple Church congregations.

⁵⁵ Simson, 144. Those apostolic fathers, usually recognizable by the almost unbearable agony and spiritual pain they bear for a place, a city, a nation or a people group, become the local backbone, the regional or national pillars of faith', anchoring the whole movement of house churches and being responsible for any celebrations and the city church that will emerge.

individual parts being integrated into the whole system. Each part is more than it would be if only operating by itself, an organic synthesis, so to speak.

Steve Meeks illustrates the “Principle of Holons.”⁵⁶ He describes the similarity between organic synthesis and the personal dimension of interdependence in relational Christianity:

Let me illumine the meaning of “organic synthesis” through a power principle taught in the social sciences. Social scientists have recognized what is called the “principle of holons.” A Holon is something which is whole and complete at one level, but merely a part of a larger whole at another level. For instance, the letter “a” is complete in itself; it is the letter “a.” But when it becomes part of the word “bark,” it now finds its significance as part of a larger whole. The word “bark” is complete in itself as a word, but when included in a sentence, the word “bark” means one thing in a sentence beginning, “The bark of a tree...” And means another thing in a sentence beginning, “The bark of the dog...”⁵⁷

This principle holds enormous importance for Simple Church leadership: individual parts integrated into the whole system are of greater significance than the parts themselves. In the organic realm, each species or member is a distinct type of organism whose particular form allows its members to successfully occupy a particular niche or set of niches in a complex ecological system, of which they are an *interdependent* part.⁵⁸ This blueprint of nature, called structured interdependence, is the principle that underpins leadership in the organic paradigm.

⁵⁶ This understanding of holons comes from Ken Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul: Integrating Science and Religion* (New York: Random House, 1998), 67-69.

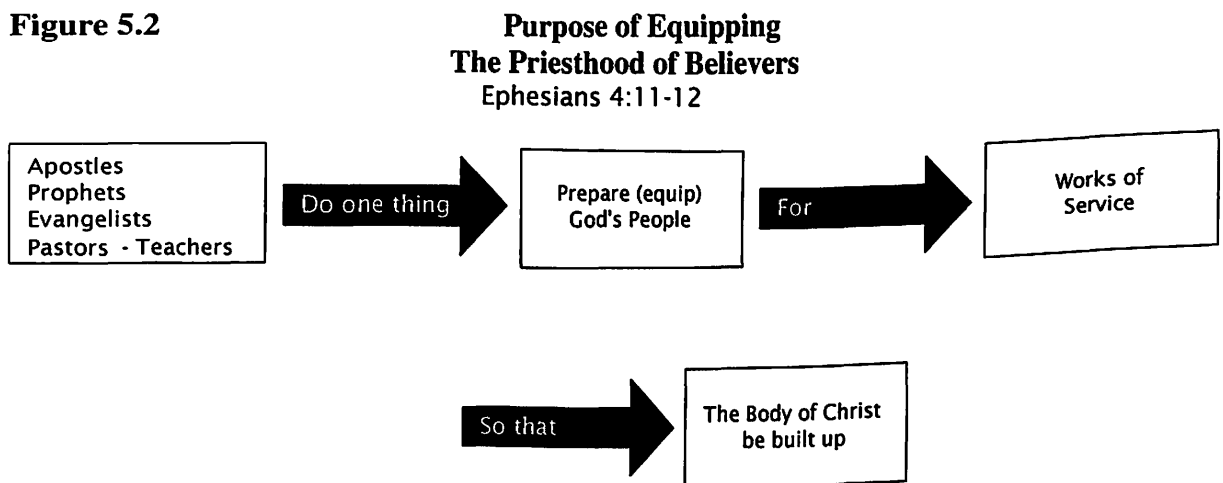
⁵⁷ Steve Meeks, *Incarnational Christianity: Expressing the Fullness of Christ in the Church* (Houston: Calvary Publications, 2001), 83-84.

⁵⁸ See If Price and Lilly Evans, “Punctuated Equilibrium: An Organic Model for the Learning Organisation,” *Journal of the European Foundation for Management Development*, 93.1, <http://members.aol.com/ifprice/peqforum.html> (accessed November 16, 2004).

Starting with the priesthood of all believers, the need arises to equip and train people for service. Since “the central task of leadership is to build an apostolic, ministering community,”⁵⁹ God establishes leaders to prepare his people for works of service. Ephesians 4:11-12 enumerates the ministry gifts given by Christ. Each one holds a significant but equal place in healthy church leadership.

It was he, who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...

Figure 5.2



Snyder comments on this:

The purpose of leadership is to prepare a people who demonstrate and announce the purpose and direction of God through Jesus Christ. Such leadership, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, works to create a people whose life is a witness to Jesus Christ... The word ‘prepare’ (Greek *katartismos*) is also translated ‘equip’ or ‘perfect’, a medical term that refers to the ‘knitting together of bone.’⁶⁰

It describes the function and responsibility of the APEPT team as that of knitting together bones that are fractured or out of place. This word is vital to what Paul is saying. These

⁵⁹ Snyder, *Decoding the Church*, 91.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

ministries are given to the church by Christ for the one purpose of preparing God's people for works of service. Darrell Guder states:

These ministries of leadership are given to enable the church to carry out its fundamentally missiological purpose in the world: to announce and demonstrate the new creation in Jesus Christ. It involves leaders equipping and guiding the body in ecclesial practices that form the community of oneness that is a living demonstration of the ethics of God's reign.⁶¹

An Understanding of the Fivefold Ministry

There has been much written and proposed concerning the fivefold ministry and its ecclesiological context. What I am suggesting in regards to understanding the five equipping gifts is not original, but is the result of some study and reflection on the subject.⁶² The following is described more thoroughly by Mike Breen.⁶³ Ephesians 4 teaches that there are five ministries, and every member of the Church has been given one of them. In other words, every Christian is an apostle, a prophet, an evangelist, a teacher, or a pastor. Breen sets forth his argument based on two reasons:

The first is that the text itself seems to suggest such an understanding. The second is that, as I have applied this teaching to the people in the churches that I have led, I have seen remarkable release of life, growth and spiritual power. These two reasons represent the two horizons of biblical interpretation. The first horizon is an understanding of what the text actually says. The second horizon is the effect of the word as it is applied to our contemporary context.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid., 185.

⁶² Dwayne Stone, *Gifts from the Ascended Christ: Restoring the Place of the 5-Fold Ministry* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, Inc., 1999); Reggie McNeal, *Revolution in Leadership: Training Apostles for Tomorrow's Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998); George G. Hunter III, *Church for the Unchurched* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁶³ Mike Breen, *The Apostle's Notebook* (Eastborne, England: Kingsway Publications, 2002), 146-161.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 149.

Now let us examine the text of Ephesians 4:7-8, 11-13 itself:

But to *each one* of us grace has been given as *Christ apportioned*⁶⁵ it. This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” ...It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

In this, “each one” refers to every member of the body of Christ. Paul underscores the first few verses of the chapter with these key thoughts: “...keep the unity... There is one body” (vv.3-4). Within the unity, however, there is diversity. Each one of us, although part of the whole, has a different role and responsibility, and this diversity falls into five parts. Everyone has received this grace: some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors, and some to be teachers. These ministries are a gift from God by his grace: the grace of God to empower and equip for service. This would mean that every member of the Church has one of the five ministries mentioned in verse 11.

In Paul’s other writings regarding spiritual gifts, there are key thoughts he was communicating to each of his audiences. To the Corinthians, it was the ‘manifestation’ of the Spirit, meaning revelation or enlightenment that God brings, in the midst of congregational worship.⁶⁶ To the Romans, the key word was ‘function’ in chapter 12, verse 4 (Greek *praxis*). Paul desires to teach Christians how they are able to have different functions within the body. In Ephesians 4, by using a key word ‘apportioned’,

⁶⁵ Italics are mine.

⁶⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:7.

Paul presents a comprehensive theology regarding the gifts Christ had given to the Church.

Breen suggests that there are two important criteria by which this text is to be understood: “(1) every believer receives one of the five ministries, and (2) each believer receives a different proportion of the gift than others.”⁶⁷ Christ is delivering portions of grace, which, when received by the believer, impart one of the fivefold ministries at some level of anointing. In this regard, we need to look at the word ‘apportioned’ in verse 7, which in other translations is rendered “measure.”⁶⁸ In the original text, the word ‘apportioned’ (metron) is set against the words *doreas* and *dokein*, which in most translations are rendered as ‘gift’ and ‘to give.’ A rough translation of verse 7 might be: “Grace was given according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” This is close to that rendered by the NRSV.

Comparing these translations, Paul appears to convey that there are different proportions of the ministries in the Church. There may be numerous pastors and teachers, but fewer evangelists, prophets, and apostles. Currently this seems to be true for the Western church. Also, and just as important, the meaning seems to indicate a differentiation in the amount of anointing or empowering any individual receives for a particular ministry. Some are clearly more anointed than others, and this is what Paul says.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Breen, *The Apostle's Notebook*, 157.

⁶⁸ *New English Standard Version, New Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Updated.*

⁶⁹ This understanding is crucial to understanding a proposal for Simple Church Planting within The Evangelical Church.

A good illustration of the fivefold ministry is the hand, with its five fingers. The hand possesses the capacity to have all five fingers functioning simultaneously. For example, consider the dexterity of musicians, surgeons, typists, and golfers, to name just a few. Gerald Coates, a leader of the Pioneer movement in England, uses the human hand as a metaphor and teaching tool in understanding the simultaneous and symbiotic nature of the fivefold:

The apostle is the thumb. He gives stability, holds the counterbalance, and can literally touch all the other fingers. The prophet is the index finger. He points at you and says: "You are the man!" The evangelist is the middle finger, the longest of all and sticking furthest out into the world. The ring-finger resembles the pastor/shepherd caring for internal relationships. The little finger is the teacher: he can worm his way deep into any ear, and there share the truth of the gospel.⁷⁰

Organic Leadership Qualities

In organic ecclesiology, the APEPT ministry gifts employ the organic qualities in the execution of their functional responsibilities; they operate in aggregate relational connectivity. In a sense, they function simultaneously as individuals and corporately. What follows is how the APEPT gifts should function with regard to the DNA components of simplicity, biotic potential, complexity, and self-organization.

Simplicity

As for simplicity, the APEPT team acts as a guardian. As a core value, it needs to be protected. In the Simple Church community, there is a constant tension to stay within the boundaries of simplicity. Our human tendency to control often leads to some type of structure or program that risks the freedom and spontaneity that Simple Church provides.

⁷⁰ Simson, 112.

Simplicity is a step beyond complexity. What is easy is often simple, but simple is not easy. Great skill and effort is required to both make and keep something simple. It is easy to create something that is complex. You just keep adding 'stuff' to it.⁷¹

Stressing APEPT's functionality as opposed to 'position' engenders simplicity.

Whenever these gifts are translated into official positions, the need to organize undermines simplicity. People with position now have some form of power and something to control, maintain, and protect. Western church leadership structures are as elaborate and complex as a corporate company, and the power is distributed similarly. The paid senior pastor is the CEO, and his staff becomes his department heads. The elders or lay-leaders are the directors, and the lay people are the resource pool.

Ironically, the corporate world is shifting away from this, and many current CEOs say they are leading a team of peers in what is termed as "participative leadership" or "organic leadership."⁷² This is an attempt to flatten the elite structures and bring the workers and management together. Corporations are attempting to simplify!

The missional apostolic church empowers its people through simple relationships, and leadership emerges through the normal connectivity of community. Connectivity is best understood in the context of family relationships. God's plan for his people is that they be a family with healthy parents overseeing and caring for its specific and particular needs. In terms of 'simple,' healthy APEPT leadership supplies spiritual parenting for the family of God.

⁷¹ Neil Cole, *Cultivating a Life for God* (Carol Stream, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1999), 34.

⁷² Leadersdirect, "Organic Leadership 2004," <http://www.leadersdirect.com/organic.htm> (accessed November 11, 2004).

Biotic Potential

Within the organic quality of biotic potential, is the principle of multiplication. APEPT facilitates the natural growth and development of the community. The Simple Church, like every form of organic growth sooner or later reaches its natural limits. A tree does not keep getting bigger; it brings forth new trees, which in turn produce more trees. This is the biotic principle of “multiplication,” which characterizes all of God’s creation.⁷³

When Simple Churches multiply with the potential for exponential growth, there is a need for a leadership structure that can expand at the rate of a church multiplication movement. Healthy APEPT teams grow in pace with congregational growth, and serve as the initiating factor in organizing or adapting to change. Wolfgang Simson explains how this works:

The fivefold ministry functions as the self-organizing powers of the church. They are part of the built in “biotic growth potential,” an internal structure, part of the spiritual DNA of the church, which forms itself within the body of Christ just as the human body forms its own lymphatic system etc., with an amazing and in-built ability to grow organically with the general growth of the human body, and maintain or even cure itself.⁷⁴

Complexity and Self-Organization

Living systems self-organize by developing shared understanding of what is important, what is acceptable behavior, what actions are required, and how these actions will be accomplished. In the process, they develop workers, networks, channels of

⁷³ Schwarz, 68.

⁷⁴ Simson, 110.

communication, and complex physical structures. “As the system develops, new capacities emerge from living and working together.”⁷⁵

Complexity theory suggests that “emergent structures” arise from the church’s complex vitality as they are needed. That is, the church grows itself—in vitality, ministry and numbers—will often give rise to the necessary structure. Thus the key issue may be more of discernment than of structural cleverness or planning.⁷⁶

In a time when it is impossible to predict the future, as we are overwhelmed by multiple variables, increasingly there is the need for flexibility and adaptability to changing circumstances rather than for long range plans. In the organic paradigm, APEPT ministry produces functional structures. These structures emerge naturally out of the Church’s life specific to the current cultural needs, rather than producing programs targeted for a specific people group or region.

We need to remember that behind every spiritual gift including leadership, there is the Giver, the Holy Spirit of God. Hjalmarson makes a wonderful point concerning leadership and gifting when he states:

It would be pointless to talk about gifted ministry without talking about the Giver. Many teachers have focused on the fivefold gifts of Ephesians 4 and neglected the flow and completeness of the passage. We need servants who lead, not leaders who serve! We live among a leader fixated people, in a power fixated age! We need to recapture a servant mind.⁷⁷

In an environment where this dynamic is encouraged and expected, the spiritual growth of the congregants is more likely to occur. Because of the relatively small size of

⁷⁵ Margaret Wheatley, “Goodbye, Command and Control,” *Leader to Leader*, no. 5, Summer 1997, <http://www.pfdf.org/leaderbooks/L2L/summer97/wheatley.html> (accessed November 11, 2004).

⁷⁶ Snyder, *Decoding the Church*, 42.

⁷⁷ Hjalmarson, “The New Apostles.”

an average family, behavior that falls short of the norm is pronounced and out in the open. The usual response when a child or member fails to develop in keeping with family expectations is for the parents and maturing siblings to come to the aid of the one struggling. The struggle is usually something the others have experienced and therefore are able to help the one in need. The focus is not on the failure, but on the welfare and growth of the child and the overall health of the family. Therefore, the administration of care by parents and siblings is extended from a positive base.

APEPT ministry, operating with organic qualities, is the preferred leadership form in Simple Church ecclesiology. The Lord had this in mind when he gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to pastors, and some to be teachers. This fivefold ministry leadership is the means for the Body of Christ to function with the goal of seeing God's kingdom come and his will done right here where we are, just as it is in heaven.

Leadership is more than the responsibility of one man or a select group, it belongs to every member who is answering Jesus' call to come and follow. For the apostolic missional communities that are emerging, leadership is a corporate endeavor. It is the entire body following the lead of its head. Leadership moves the organic life form known as the Church and enables it to maintain its incarnational distinctive—to become flesh and blood and move out into the neighborhoods, engaging the culture.

Chapter 6 — SIMPLE CHURCH AND THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

In short, the congregation should be of such structure and pattern that common people can operate it and multiply it indefinitely among the masses. In North America, the indefinitely reproducible pattern is not the highly successful church, led by a very exceptional preacher, which erects a set of buildings covering a city block and counts its members in the thousands. That is one good pattern in certain situations, but it is impossible in most places.¹

While the world is rethinking its entire cultural formation, it is time to find new ways of being the church that are true to our postmodern context. It is time for a Postmodern Reformation.²

We've become increasingly convinced that what the church needs to find its way out of the situation its way out of the situation it's in at the beginning of the twenty-first century is not more faddish theories about how to grow the church without fundamentally reforming its structures.³



In this chapter, I present three reasons why The Evangelical Church ought to embrace the Simple Church paradigm as a viable model for church planting and

¹ Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 17.

² Leonard Sweet, *Aqua Church: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church into Today's Fluid Culture* (Colorado Springs: Group Publishing Inc., 1999), 17.

³ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 6.

leadership development. From these three primary reasons flow a number of secondary reasons.

Practical Reason One: Size

The first reason for planting Simple Churches is their small size. Big is not always better. Big, however, is what we have been trained to want. In this paradigm, bigger is realized as congregations multiply rather than add. Simple Church builds the bigger citywide church by dividing and multiplying. On occasion, there are large gatherings, but the basic congregation is still small. When more than 20 or 30 people attend consistently, it is time to start another congregation.

This dynamic is crucial in sustaining the organic dimension of life within the Simple Church structure. Relational dynamics dictate that when a group of people gathered together is larger than 20 individuals, intimacy is lost and the level of participation lessens. When the group is larger than 20, a barrier is crossed and “the group stops being organic and starts to become formal, and even to feel the need to follow a set agenda.”⁴

Another advantage to small size is that it provides the community an ability to manage itself. One question everyone asks when first considering Simple Church is, “How do you control things? How do you protect from heresy?” When dealing with these issues, small size facilitates resolution rather than hindering it. The family structure

⁴ Simson, 17. There is, in each culture, a very important line between organic and the organized, the informal and the formal, the spontaneous and the liturgical, which Simson terms the “20-barrier,” because in many cultures 20 is a maximum number where people still feel ‘family’, organic, and informal without the need to get formal or organized. I have found this to be true on a number of occasions when Epic Wineskins attendance has been between 8-12 individuals. When this occurs, we experience 100% participation from those gathered. When our congregation is over 20 the participation level drops dramatically. This dynamic has proven to be the case 100% of the time.

of Simple Church removes the choice of whether or not problematic issues receive attention. Issues that normally would go unnoticed in larger institutional settings are usually more pronounced and out in the open. As such, they must be dealt with immediately, or the congregation's survival will be jeopardized. Like in any family, when a member is out of order and needs discipline, the other family members administer what is appropriate for the sake of family stability.

The small size dynamic allows for the emergence of community accountability and intimacy at deeper levels than would occur in larger groups. This produces a family-like atmosphere where members connect with one another in profound ways. Nominal members find this type of atmosphere disconcerting and in time either experience renewal or leave the group altogether. Like family, everyone contributes to the betterment of the whole group. When one member slacks off or straggles behind, other siblings and parents are aware and intervene.

Having participated in Simple Church for several years, I find the dynamic of small size to be a great asset, if not its greatest. Small makes possible the two remaining reasons for The Evangelical Church to embrace Simple Churches. Small allows congregations to be relationally based and maintain simplicity.

Practical Reason Two: Relationship

The second reason The Evangelical Church ought to embrace Simple Churches is that they are relationally founded and based. Everything transpires in the context of relationship. Referencing the importance of relationship, Leonard Sweet states:

Relationships and interrelatedness are as primary in the spiritual realm as they are in the physical world. In theology, what is important are not things themselves,

but relationships between things. In fact, nothing is ever one thing or another, but rather a relationship between things. These involve the relational connections both within the organic communities and those without.⁵

The importance of this truth is realized when observing the current postmodern culture, which at its core welcomes relational connectivity, a dynamic necessary for Simple Church plants to germinate and grow. In both the Church and the secular world, humanity cries for authentic relationship. Often, a fractured family life has deprived people of the real relationships that would have given them security. There is a growing trend in today's culture to reclaim the spiritual roots of family.

Simple Churches are in a unique place because of their mobility and size to play a unique role in restoring a sense of family to many who are searching for authenticity. The words of Malachi suggest that God's intention is to establish spiritual parents who are willing to nurture spiritual children and help them grow in their spirituality. This is a fulfillment of the Lord's promise to, in the last days, "turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers."⁶ In this relationally starved culture, the opportunity is there for Simple Churches to rise to the occasion and fill this need for spiritual parenting. I suggest that God's heart is for us to take a generation that has been cursed by the breakdown of family relationships and rebuild trust, using the Church as his instrument of reconnection with them.

A recent report, *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities*, was prepared by the Commission on Children at Risk, a group comprised of 33 prominent children's doctors, research scientists, and mental health and youth

⁵ Leonard Sweet, *Out of the Question—Into the Mystery: Getting Lost in the Godlife Relationship* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2004), 16.

⁶ Malachi 4:6.

service professionals.⁷ The commission was convened because of a growing sense that children and teens today are facing a widespread and deepening crisis. “In the midst of unprecedented material affluence, large and growing numbers of U.S. children and adolescents are failing to flourish,” the commission said. Mental and emotional difficulties have afflicted our youth at staggering rates, including depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorder, conduct disorders, and thoughts of suicide. Beyond that, a wide variety of physical ailments have their roots in emotional troubles, such as heart disease, irritable bowel syndrome, and ulcers. The report goes on to say:

Despite increased ability to treat depression, the current generation of young people is more likely to be depressed and anxious than was its parent's generation. According to one study, by the 1980s, U.S. children as a group were reporting more anxiety than did *children who were psychiatric patients* in the 1950s. (Emphasis in original)⁸

From the commission's perspective, the cause of this crisis is that children and teens are experiencing “a lack of connectedness... to other people, and the lack of deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning.”⁹ This report stated that the human brain appears to have a built-in capacity for religious experience. For example, using brain imaging, scientists have discovered that spiritual activities such as prayer or meditation actually increase the activity in specific areas of the brain. “A search for spiritual relationship with the Creator may be an inherent developmental process of adolescence.”¹⁰

⁷ Commission on Children at Risk, Institute for American Values, *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2003).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The key solution to the problems facing our children and youth, according to the commission, is what is called authoritative communities. “Authoritative communities are groups that live out the types of connectedness that our children increasingly lack,” the report said. “They are groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life.”¹¹ Among the characteristics that define an authoritative community:

It is a social institution that is warm and nurturing; establishes clear limits and expectations; is multigenerational; has long-term focus; reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person; encourages spiritual and religious development; and is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor.¹²

The commission stated, “We believe that building and strengthening authoritative communities is likely to be our society’s best strategy for ameliorating [changing for the better] the current crisis of childhood and improving the life of U.S. children and adolescents.”¹³ This model of authoritative communities presented by the commission members should look at least vaguely familiar to Christians—its sounds much like the New Testament model of church life. The Simple Church paradigm is ideal for addressing this situation, by providing the relational connections which so many are searching for.

Practical Reason Three: Simplicity

The third reason The Evangelical Church ought to embrace this paradigm is that it is simple. The purpose of church planting is to make disciples. In order for church

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

planting to have maximum impact on the culture, it must be simple. Dawn Ministries

International describes why they chose this type of church planting:

Our desire is to identify and nurture God inspired gatherings that multiply. We are focusing our attention on emerging models that express the life of the Body in simpler, more familial settings where Christianity is a way of life and relationships and community are the normal expression of life in Christ. We believe that the most effective way to fulfill this purpose is to embrace the concept of simple church. This is one of the keys to saturation church planting because only that which is simple can multiply rapidly and organically. Simple does not imply a particular structure but builds on the foundation of household and extended family.¹⁴

Simple Church reproduces at a much faster rate than complex church. So in practical matters of church planting, it is important to keep focused on the concepts of relationship and simplicity.

The simple nature of this paradigm carries over to other important issues.

Organic Church Planting is Simple

Planting Simple Churches is different from other types of church plants. When considering the traditional church plant, one of the first issues is considering the infrastructure needed to begin. This usually follows a plan or process of securing items considered essential, a process that can become stressful and complicated. Contrast this is to the Simple Church plant, which is relatively easy to start. The following items are unnecessary in a Simple Church plant:

- To buy property
- Or a building
- A pulpit
- Pews

¹⁴ "Simple Church," *DAWN North America*, <http://www.dawnministries.org/globalministries/northamerica/simplechurch.htm> (accessed April 20, 2003).

- Hymn books
- Piano
- Baptistery
- Sunday school
- Youth pastor
- A denomination
- To be incorporated
- To meet on Sundays
- To have church bulletin
- Or to meet at the same place every week
- A sign with the name of your church on it
- A name¹⁵

None of the above items is bad or wrong, but neither are they essential. “The more non-essentials we add, the more difficult we make it to start a new church.”¹⁶ One of the benefits of Simple Church plants is the focus on *keeping it simple*.

Expense and cost distinguish Simple Church planting from more traditional approaches, as it is less expensive. Traditional church planting approaches such as daughter churches are more expensive, often ranging from \$50,000 to \$300,000 per start-up depending on the situation and locale. These costs include renting space to meet, pastor’s salary package, advertising, and other expenses. One reason Simple Church is less expensive to initiate is its use of bi-vocational or tent-making leadership which functions apostolically. There are those special individuals responsible for an entire Simple Church network who could receive full salaries for their role, but generally speaking, most expenses within this paradigm are spent on missional endeavors rather than financial outlay for leadership and staffing.

¹⁵ Robert Fitts, *The Church in the House: A Return to Simplicity* (Salem, OR: Preparing the Way Publishers, 2001), 17.

¹⁶ Ibid.

A Simple Church Planting Proposal for The Evangelical Church

What now follows is a description of a Simple Church planting strategy that might be used to aid The Evangelical Church in becoming a church planting movement. Church growth experts and missiologists state that “the most effective ways of reaching people for Christ is the planting of new churches.”¹⁷ Peter Wagner has stated that “the single most effective way to evangelize is to plant new churches.”¹⁸ The question we must ask is, “How is this to be done?” Simply, a conscious effort should be made to plant Simple Churches among unreached people groups here in North America through relational connections, or *oikos*spheres. “Missional studies have concluded that church planting movements are customarily preceded by a deliberate strategy to begin new disciple-making communities.”¹⁹ Church planters and organic congregations are always in a process of beginning new congregations through relational connections and the multiplying of their own congregations.

In response to the question, Dr. William Vermillion, General Superintendent of The Evangelical Church, has asked, “Where is God taking us now?... I believe very firmly that He desires for us to once again be a church-planting movement.”²⁰ He goes on to define a church planting movement as “an intentional plan to evangelize and

¹⁷ Zdero, 112.

¹⁸ C. Peter Wagner, *Church Growth for the Greater Harvest* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1990), 11.

¹⁹ Garrison, 34.

²⁰ Vermillion, “Report of the General Superintendent.”

disciple the lost and in that process establish communities of believers. While various methods may be used, prayer is always the essential element.”²¹

In order to impact the culture significantly, Simple Church holds that churches must multiply themselves as rapidly as possible.²² The desire of Simple Church planting is to infiltrate the culture with congregations in every neighborhood to the degree that spiritual transformation occurs. Using only the traditional or institutional church planting model, this goal is unrealistic due to the time required for congregations to develop a new church plant or divide into multiple groups. Often their size and infrastructure slows the multiplicative element down considerably, if not nullifying it altogether.

Another factor that slows this process is the Bible College and Seminary training required by numerous denominations for pastoral ministry. For those desiring pastoral ministry, this usually translates into four to seven years of training with expenses in the six-figure range incurred. It is not uncommon for Seminary graduates to face a debt load that will require years to erase. Because of these financial burdens, many are unable to follow their calling into ministry because the salaries they receive at the entry level are insufficient to cover the cost of this financial load. Added to this are other denominational requirements that could add more time to the training. This does not even consider the number of people who abandon their training due to the stresses that accompany such a path. There must be a willingness on the part of denominational and ministry leadership to use lay leadership with only the biblical call of God on their lives and minimal training.

²¹ Ibid.

²² See Figure 4.1 in Chapter Four, page 75.

A historic example of this rapid multiplication of churches is the Methodist and Baptist denominations during nineteenth century America. According to Justo L. Gonzalez, the use of itinerant ministers without formal education was the major factor in the growth of these churches:

While other denominations lacked personnel because they had no educational facilities on the frontier, Methodists and Baptists were willing to use whoever felt called by the Lord. The Methodist vanguard were lay preachers, many of them serving an entire "circuit," always under the supervision of the "Connection" and its bishops. The Baptists made use of farmers and others who made a living from their trade, and who also served as pastors of the local church. When a new area was opened for settlement, there usually was among the settlers a devout Baptist to take up the ministry of preaching. Thus, both Methodist and Baptist became strong in these new territories, and by the middle of the century they were the largest Protestant denominations in the country.²³

According to John Mark Terry:

Circuit riders encouraged and appointed lay preachers to carry on the local ministry while they were busy along the circuit. The lay preachers played a great part in spreading Methodism on the frontier. Normally, a young man who gave evidence of faith and speaking ability was encouraged to preach some trial sermons. If these efforts pleased the people, then the circuit rider gave the young man an 'exhorter's license.' Some of the exhorters became circuit riders, but many remained exhorters their whole lives.²⁴

In the late 1800s, Methodist churches were multiplying into so many new congregations that they were averaging one new church a day, with plans for two churches per day. This is part of our Evangelical Church history. What I am suggesting is not a new model at all, but going back into our history and once again using ordinary men and women called of God and equipping them to plant Simple Churches.

²³ Justo L. Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1985), 246.

²⁴ John Mark Terry, *Evangelism: A Concise History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 128-129.

If indeed every believer is apportioned by Christ to receive one or more of the fivefold ministry gifts for preparing God's people for service so that the body might be built up—and multiplied—then there is a need to *release a multitude of individuals*²⁵ currently in our churches. My conviction is that there are many individuals in our churches with these ministry gifts. But due to the denomination's current pastoral leadership paradigm, they are unaware of the other APEPT roles. In The Evangelical Church, the fivefold function that is paramount is that of itinerant elder. On occasion, the evangelist is mentioned, but those of apostolic and prophetic gifting are nearly non-existent. My question is: "Where are these gifts in the contemporary context of The Evangelical Church?" If we were to give careful attention this issue, we would find individuals (both men and women) with these gifts residing in our congregations.

These individuals have *oikosspheres* that most of us professional clergy can only dream of. What an opportunity to use these gifted people to plant Simple Churches throughout our denominational landscape with a familial dynamic that invites the emerging culture of young and old to participate together as whole people in the body of Christ. There are many in our midst already called by the Spirit to this Simple Church expression, but have yet to be affirmed. I am not suggesting a new clerical order, but releasing men and women to exercise their functional leadership gifts for the building up of the body by planting Simple Churches throughout the denomination. Their intentional plan would be "to evangelize and disciple the lost and in that process establish communities of believers."²⁶

²⁵ Italics are mine.

²⁶ Vermillion, "Report of the General Superintendent."

These individuals could be under the supervision of a district superintendent or the denominational Director of Harvest Ministries, or subordinates of either. With some basic training such as facilitating small group Bible studies, relationship building skills, spiritual parenting, and missional understanding of the church, these people could be recognized at a conference level and sent out to plant Simple Churches in their own neighborhoods.

This should not require any restructuring of the theological education currently in existence. We must remember: the idea is to *keep it simple*. These leaders would receive regular periodic coaching and mentoring from individuals knowledgeable in Simple Church ecclesiology.

The financial support required for this endeavor would probably be minimal, covering the cost of the Simple Church leadership training. Most if not all of these individuals would be employed in the marketplace where they would derive their financial support.

I recognize that for many people, what I suggest above is a stretch. As our General Superintendent stated, “We need to ask God to allow us to think His thoughts and be willing to think creatively and out of the box.”²⁷ I have probably raised more questions than I’ve answered, but this is a huge step in a good direction. I am convinced this will honor our Father’s heart as we engage the harvest He so longs for us to reach.

²⁷ Ibid.

Potential of the Simple Church Paradigm

Simple Church has wonderful possibilities, as the following report from China describes:

I thought you might be interested to learn a little about the house church system in China. This one church I will share about is typical. Its membership is approaching 100,000. Its radius is 300 miles.

The leader is 30 years old and he has a wife and a young son. I have been to this church and witnessed the brilliant young people in it. When a young person receives the Lord Jesus as Savior their immediate goal is to be a co-worker to be sent out for the Lord. They are not given an office with a computer, phone or fax machine. No retirement plans offered here or head Bishop post to shoot for. Without a doubt, they all know that sooner or latter, they will be arrested, tortured and put into prison for the Lord.

So the leadership is committed to teaching and raising up these young people to become full time gifted anointed evangelists for Christ. As the revival continues to multiply in the area, this church sends out 30 full time workers into the countryside. Their meetings start at 5:00 a.m. and often last until dark. They gather in the dark and leave in the dark singing and praising the Lord in the Spirit as they go.²⁸

Lord Jesus, may that happen here!

The North American culture is desperate for relational connection and spirituality, and the Simple Church paradigm holds tremendous potential to fulfill that. In *Houses That Change the World*, Wolfgang Simson shares twelve advantages of the house church movement; what follows are eleven of the twelve.²⁹

1. **Discipled multiplication** – mentoring multiplication and discipleship is the focus of the organic concept.
2. **Persecution-resistant structure** – because they are so fluid they are able to go underground quite easily as opposed to traditional church with buildings. The church in China is a case in point.

²⁸ John Dee, "China Report 1999: A Visit with the Underground Church Now 85 Million Strong," *House Church Central Online Magazine*, <http://www.hccentral.com/magazine/china2.html>, (accessed 30 June 2005).

²⁹ Simson, 32-38.

3. ***Freedom from church growth barriers*** – there is no limitation to growth because the building or facility is not large enough. An organic cell-reproduction process.
4. ***Involvement of many more people more efficiently*** – program based churches are organized at a congregational level. They have proved quite inefficient and resource hungry. The 80 – 20 principle has a short life span if any at all in the organic paradigm.
5. ***Breaking the pastoral care dilemma*** – a known and self-defeating problem of the congregational church: as the number grow; the pastoral quality usually goes down, because the pastor can no longer tend all the sheep.
6. ***Providing a place of life transformation and accountability*** – it's an ideal setting to change values, transfer life and therefore transform lifestyles. An analysis of the western church shows that the congregational model is almost totally ineffective at changing basic values and lifestyles.
7. ***The house is the most effective place for new Christians*** – The traditional church, whereby everything rotates around programs and administration as the hub, structurally resents new people coming in.³⁰ The congregation is, statistically speaking, a most unfriendly zone for new Christians, accounting for unbelievably large drop-out rates as high as 99 per cent in evangelistic follow-up programs.
8. ***Solving the leadership crisis*** – ideally organic congregations are led by elders, administering spiritual parenting. They are usually modest and authentic parents themselves who have a few years experience. Leadership development is hands on and relational mentorship.
9. ***Overcoming the clergy-laity division*** – Organic congregations do not need a pastor in the traditional sense at all, because elders, functioning together with corporate giftedness of the congregational network maintain the multiplying life of the church.
10. ***It is undeniably cheaper*** – It is just plain less expensive when considering buildings, programs, staffing, salaries, insurance, taxes, and the list goes on. If there was no other advantage, this is enough to embrace the planting of organic house churches. In an age when costs are reaching prohibitive levels, it's time to be more stewardship conscious.

³⁰ This involves the expectations placed upon newcomers to conform to what is provided and programmed. What is communicated, either verbally or non-verbally, is "This is the way it's done around here," or "We've never done it that way before," which are negative messages.

11. *It resurrects the city church* – the organic paradigm sees the church organized on four levels:

- a. The house (where organic fellowship is possible, irrespective of what it is called).
- b. The congregational church (the traditional meeting-oriented denomination church).
- c. The city or region.
- d. The denominational (the network, conference or organization of the denominational churches of an area).

The house church allows for the regaining of *a* and *c*. The church in the New Testament was named according to its geographical location, not denomination... Yet we cannot deny that the potential for house churches is great in a culture that values intimate relationships, shared leadership, transparency, and teamwork.³¹

Role and Response of The Evangelical Church

A goal of this dissertation is to present the Simple Church paradigm as distinct and unique in contrast to the traditional forms of church that are familiar. There are significant advantages to the planting of Simple Churches. This method is in our Evangelical blood lines—our heritage. Whatever the model or the method, it is necessary for it to be relational. In Simple Church ecclesiology, everything occurs in the context of relationship, connecting us to one another and to the emerging culture. In considering our denomination's role and response to this distinctive expression of church with all its potential and possibilities, let me suggest five stages to embracing this paradigm: realize, release, reinforce, recognize, and reform.

First, as a denomination, let us understand that Simple Church has a different DNA from current church strategies including small groups, cell groups, or para-church ministries. "They are not appendages to conventional congregations. Rather, they are fully functioning churches in and of themselves that network with others of like mind in a

³¹ Simson, 32-39.

city or region.”³² They do not require nor do they desire church buildings, expensive programs, professional clergy, or fancy worship services. They desire to gather together in an open and interactive fashion, just like family.

Second, let us release Simple Church efforts from within our own ranks from judgment or hostility, knowing that their DNA is different from that of our own traditional efforts, and on occasion quite different. The Lord is allowing all kinds and types of church life to emerge. Because Simple Church networks desire to re-establish ancient apostolic patterns and practices, denominations will need to avoid the temptation of trying to shape them into forms and roles that are traditional. The grassroots nature of Simple Church allows for leadership to focus on function rather than official positions and titles.³³ “They will need to be given the same freedoms as more traditional leaders to function in their calling from God to lead, train, and oversee the next generation of Simple Church leaders.”³⁴

Third, let us reinforce the Simple Church paradigm by supporting it financially and offering aid and resources to leaders in the way of seminary-equivalent courses, church planting workshops, and training materials. This will accelerate both the emergence of Simple Church networks and establish relational ties for further kingdom partnership.

³² Zdero, 117.

³³ The largest hurdle for Evangelicals just might be providing affirmation, credibility, validation, and encouragement to leaders in the Simple Church paradigm. The mindset and requirement that elders have a Master of Divinity Degree in order to be qualified as elders realistically needs reform and at least to be re-examined.

³⁴ Zdero, 117. Within the organic paradigm, the mindset is that a majority of the leadership God will raise up for the generations that follow resides currently in the harvest.

Fourth, let us recognize and validate Simple Church congregations in the eyes of the broader Christian community by legitimizing their existence and being open to future participation and partnership with them. This will deepen our understanding of each other and enlarge their connectivity within the larger body of Christ, resulting in God being glorified by our unity of purpose. By providing the option of Simple Churches as a means for church planting, horizons broaden and multiple options are made available for our constituency.

Finally, let us consider some level of reform. What type of changes might God ask of the Evangelical Church in order that we could embrace and validate Simple Churches and become more organic ourselves than is currently the case? How will we structure ourselves as a denomination in order to facilitate this crucial dimension of Christ's body? Are there ways and means we could provide for our traditional churches to traverse in order to affect a more organic ecclesiology?

CONCLUSION

I began this dissertation by describing four types of churches: the Garden, Park, Glen, and Meadow, as described in Leonard Sweet's introductory essay in *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*. This book travels through the same theological forest as H. Richard Niebuhr did in his classic text *Christ and Culture* (1951), challenging followers of Christ "to live out the meaning of incarnation."³⁵ Sweet's essay anatomized the complex subject of Christ and culture in a different way by describing

³⁵ Leonard Sweet, *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, 14.

four types of clearings left behind after a forest fire, depicting where twenty-first century leaders labor.

This dissertation has been about the Meadow. Sweet wonderfully describes meadows in the following:

The Meadow is a tract of moist, low-lying grassland where wildflowers grow in profusion. In the meadow, there are lots of boggy places with fragile vegetation and colorful lichens. Meadows are nomadic, wandering from space to space depending on conditions of the surrounding grasslands, wetlands, and woodlands. Meadows mostly just happen. They are not highly managed by humans. They are Mother Nature's navel, some of the most fertile areas in nature. You can almost hear the heart beating underneath the ground.³⁶

For you who reside in the Garden, Park, or Glen, this has been a stretch outside the confines of your clearing. I thank you for listening! Let us remember that all four clearings are part of God's larger eco-system, and continue our journey, remembering that:

The church is unique because it is the only social organism in all creation that can be called the body of Christ. Yet due to the consistency of God's created order, it is an organism with its own ecology. Thus it can be understood ecologically and organically.³⁷

Historically, change is a reality for both culture and the Church manifested through its various paradigms. Like others, The Evangelical Church stands at the crossroads of modernity and postmodernity, and the choice of which road to traverse will determine its future, either positively or negatively. The culture has changed to postmodernity. Questions remain: Will the Church rise to the occasion? And will she missionally engage contemporary postmodern culture? The last 50 years have seen the

³⁶ Ibid, 33-34.

³⁷ Snyder, *Decoding the Church*, 90.

North American Church decline to a place of marginality. If she continues employing the old paradigm, the duplication of current deficiencies will be the result.

To understand the situation, The Evangelical Church must realize that “the postmodern world, governed by quantum physics and its emphasis on relationships, is God's end run around the modern world. A quantum world stands ready to accept design and divine interaction. God himself is stirring the pot.”³⁸ That design and divine interaction that God is stirring is the transition of the Church toward its postmodern context in new organic life forms.

³⁸ McNeal, *The Present Future*, 6.

Appendix A — Institutional and Organic Approach to Church Planting

	<u>Institutional</u>	<u>Organic</u>
SEATING	Rows	Circles
ENVIRONMENT	Anonymous	Intimate
LEADER SOURCE	From institution of Higher learning	From the harvest
GROWTH	Additional where it can be found	Multiplication at every level
RESULTS	An audience is up attracted	An army is raised
MINISTRY PRACTITIONERS	The Ordained	The Ordinary
RESOURCES	Imported to the harvest	Discovered in the harvest
PRIMARY LEADERSHIP	Pastoral teacher	Apostolic team
LEARNING LAB	Classroom-based Education	Trench-based Education
COST	Expensive	Inexpensive
MINISTRY LOCATION	The Meeting Place	The Marketplace
GOAL	Deeper knowledge relationships	Deeper
SUCCESS	Full seating capacity capacity	Full sending
CHURCH POSTURE	Passive: “y’all Come	Active: “We all go!”
ATTRACTION	Felt need programming	Obvious Life Transformation
EXPECTATIONS	Conversions are Surprising	Conversions are Expected

From Neil Cole and Paul Kaak, *The Organic Church Planters Greenhouse: Intensive Training Event Participants Notes* (Signal Hill, CA: Church Multiplication Associates, 2003), 1-8.

Appendix B — Contrasting Congregational & House Churches

	Congregational Church	New Testament house church
<i>Place</i>	Meets in sanctuaries	Moves from house to house
<i>Main Functionaries</i>	Pastors, teachers, evangelists	Apostles, prophets, elders
<i>Finances</i>	Tithes and offerings	Sharing all they have
<i>Lifestyle</i>	Individual	Community
<i>Evangelism</i>	Outreach, action, programs, specialists	Natural discipling of neighbors; multiplying itself
<i>Battle cry</i>	Getting more people into the church	Getting the church into people's homes
<i>Size</i>	Large, impersonal groups	Small, intimate groups
<i>Teaching style</i>	Static, sermon-centered	Kinetic, question and answer style
<i>Most important</i>	Lead the church	Equip each believer for doing the ministry themselves
<i>Task of pastor</i>	Program; preach good sermons; house visits, etc.	The ministry themselves
<i>Center</i>	Worship service in a religious building	Life in an ordinary house
<i>Keyword</i>	Become a member	Go and make disciples
<i>Ministry</i>	Performance-oriented	Equipping-oriented, empowering others church send itself as a multipliable unit

Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change the World*, 31.

Appendix C — Simple Church Websites

Anabaptist House Churches
<http://www.house-church.net>

Apex House Church Network
<http://www.apexchurch.org>

Dove Christian Fellowship International
<http://dcfi.org>

House Church Central
<http://www/hccentral.com>

House2House
<http://house2house.tv>

HouseChurch.CA
<http://housechurch.ca/index.php>

Mentor and Multiply
<http://www.mentorandmultiply.com>

New Testament Restoration Foundation
<http://www.ntrf.org>

DAWN North America
<http://www.dawnministries.org/globalministries/northamerica/home.htm>

Simple Church
<http://www.simplechurches.net>

The Summit Fellowships
<http://http://www.summithome.org>

The Parousia Network of House & Cell Churches
<http://www.parousianetwork.com>

The Rock House Church Network
<http://www.therock.us>

Appendix D — One Another Ministry in the New Testament

John 13:34-35 A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Romans 12:10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.

Romans 12:16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Romans 13:8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.

Romans 15:7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

Romans 15:14 I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.

Romans 16:16 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.

1 Corinthians 1:10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

2 Corinthians 13:12 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Galatians 5:13 You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.

Ephesians 4:2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Ephesians 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 5:19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord,

Ephesians 5:21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Colossians 3:13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Hebrews 3:13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Hebrews 10:24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

1 Peter 1:22 2 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.

1 Peter 3:8 Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.

1 Peter 4:9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

1 Peter 5:5 Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

1 Peter 5:14 Greet one another with a kiss of love.

1 John 3:11 This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.

1 John 3:23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

1 John 4:7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.

1 John 4:11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Appendix E — Suggestions for Starting Simple Churches

1. We had a number of business associates who were not Christian, but whom we have come to know pretty well over a period of months or years. We asked a dozen of them to join us in a study of business principles while enjoying pizza in our home, using the book of Proverbs as our textbook. There were no rules to our discussion; everybody's opinion was valid and there was no such thing as a wrong answer. Gradually we introduced prayer and worship and over the course of a year, every one of them became a Christian. They formed the nucleus of our original house church.

Suggestion: Draw together people from your circle of influence.

2. When we finally decided that it was okay to start a church, we asked our kids to invite all their friends from our neighborhood to come for a breakfast Bible club. We picked a Sunday morning to do this, since we reckoned that all the Christian kids would be in church. We wanted to reach the non-Christians. The main attraction was a huge cooked breakfast. Before long, we had about 20 kids coming to our home. The majority of them became Christians and some started bringing their parents with them.

Suggestion: Do something with your kids and their friends, and then include their parents.

3. A family who are committed members of a major liturgical denomination felt they needed to reach out to others who desired to see their faith come alive. They meet

midweek for their “real church” while continuing to support their local congregation.

Suggestion: Start a church alongside a mainstream congregation.

4. A couple came for just a couple of weeks before sensing that they could start something in their home and with their contacts. They had around ten non-Christian adults and a dozen kids at their first gathering!

Suggestion: Do not automatically assimilate new people into an existing group.

This may be an opportunity to start a new neighborhood.¹

These are but a few suggestions and ideas on how ordinary Christ-followers can involve themselves in Simple Church planting. The characteristics of organic church and church planting are not at all new. Historically the organic church has existed in one form or another since the birthing of the church in Acts. Let look for a moment at this movement historically and in the process include ourselves as Evangelicals.

¹ Tony and Felicity Dale, *Getting Started: A Practical Guide to House Church Planting* (Austin, TX: House2House, 2002), 86-91.

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