

Where Is God Going In 2011

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I want to spend a few minutes talking about the state of organic house church as I see it along with a vision for moving forward. I want to begin by offering a little perspective. As of 2009, the population of Spokane County stood at 468,684 people. According to historians of revival, during times of historic revival roughly 5 to 7% of the larger area population comes to genuine faith in Christ. If that holds true in the coming spiritual outpouring it would mean somewhere between 23,434 and 32,808 new believers coming into the Church in a short period of time.

Either of those numbers is greater than the present attendance of every mega-church in our area combined! Here's the simple question: If God answers all of our prayers for revival and spiritual awakening and we simply achieve the historic averages for an historic awakening, where do we plan to put those 23,434 new converts. What's our plan to disciple them in a way that's sustainable and reproducible and which turns them into committed protagonists of the faith rather than committed pew sitters in a church.

Using the average size church congregation in America as a guide (186 people), our traditional approach of putting people into church buildings would require building, opening and staffing between 125 and 175 new churches. The average cost of planting a new church, not including building a new building, is \$176,000 per church plant. In other words, planting 125 to 175 new traditional churches - not including any building programs, would cost between \$22 and \$30 million dollars. My friend Jerry Twombly of Building God's Way has spent his career doing capital drives and building churches and church schools. He recently wrote an article declaring that, in his professional opinion, the age of the mega-church is over because it is no longer financially viable.

So, let me ask the question again. What's your plan B. If God graciously answers all of our prayers for revival and spiritual outpouring, what's our plan for preserving the fruit of that harvest? Revival is the unplanned extra-ordinary work of the Holy Spirit by which God renews His church and expands His Kingdom. It is outside of our control. Planning how to accommodate and disciple the fruit of that extra-ordinary work of God's Spirit is the ordinary work of the Church.

Last fall, I published a weekly e-letter which got widely distributed and raised some eyebrows in the organic house church community. It was entitled "10 Years of House Church, Where Do We Go From Here?". It's available now on our new website as a PDF file. It was intended to challenge the organic house church community to "come of age", so to speak, and to get more intentional about who we are and what we are all about. So, I want to offer several observations as well as some specific challenges for moving forward as an organic house church community as well as movement.

Observation & Challenge # 1: It's time to break out our umbrellas. In the absence of a plan, our prayers for revival without any thought for what we might do when God answers those prayers resembles Christians in drought stricken areas gathering together to pray for rain but leaving their umbrellas at home. You can't help but question either the seriousness or the thoughtfulness of those kinds of prayers. It's time to break out our umbrellas.

Observation & Challenge # 2: It's time for the organic house church community in Spokane (and elsewhere) to become intentional about who we are, where we're going and what our mission is. It has been said, by people more insightful than myself, that God doesn't have a church in need of a mission so much as He has a mission in need of an obedient church. It's time for the organic house church community to become that obedient church and to re-focus ourselves on God's mission rather than our programs. A programmed church is an impotent church. A missional church is a powerful church. Which are you?

Observation & Challenge # 3: Organic House Church is a revolution in need of leaders. A couple of years ago at a National House2House Labor Day Conference George Barna gave a talk on the characteristics of revolutions and revolutionary leaders. Great presentation and I find myself going back to my notes from time to time. The presentation was a distillation of leadership principles he had discovered by studying revolutionary movements throughout history. One of his observations was that revolutions only grow as fast as their ability to reproduce leaders. To put it another way, one of the quickest and most effective ways to stop a revolution or a movement dead in its tracks (including one where the Holy Spirit is moving) is to disrupt its ability to raise up leaders. Organic house church is a revolution in both how we "do" church as well as and how to "be" the church. It is a revolution led, not by "qualified clergy" but by completely unknown revolutionaries just like you. I am convinced that as we move forward, part of becoming more intentional is that we need to become intentional about identifying, challenging and equipping organic house church leaders who can lead the church which meets in their house. And that includes some of you. There is no one in this room tonight who could not be an effective leader in this on-going spiritual revolution . . . IF - IF - you were to set your heart on it.

The real question is this: Are you prepared to become a part of what God is doing? Arthur Wallis said, "If you would make

the greatest success of your life, try to discover what God is doing in your time, and fling yourself into the accomplishment of His purpose and will". God knows what He is doing in organic house church and in spiritual revival and awakening. Do you know what He's doing? And are you prepared to take a step of faith and wholeheartedly fling yourself into it?

If you aren't willing to fling yourself wholeheartedly into what God is doing, then it's time to ask yourself "Why?".

Observation & Challenge # 4: We need to get back to basics. Chapter 1 of my forthcoming book, *"The Least of These: The Role of Good Deeds In A Jesus-Shaped Spirituality"* is entitled "Jesus And Hoola Hoops". My point in that section is simple: We are a terribly fad-driven and easily distracted people, both as Americans in our culture, and as Christians in our churches. What's distracting you from being a part of what God wants to do in your life, particularly when it comes to becoming the organic house church leader He has called you to be? In the Church we call our distracting fads "programs". I've been an interested and involved observer of the religious/church landscape in Spokane for well over a decade now. And one of my conclusions is that we are a distracted version of Thomas Edison's lightbulb experiments. Do you remember those? After his 1,000th lightbulb experiment burned out someone asked Thomas Edison how he felt about another failure. Edison responded, "That wasn't a failure. I now know one more way not to make a light bulb!" We as an extended church body seem intent on discovering and testing every conceivable way to NOT do what God has called us to do, saving obedience to His clear commands for the absolute last alternative. If all other plans fail, we'll give up and do it God's way. But not until we've tried everything else. Now, let me say a couple of things about getting back to basics in organic house church.

First, getting back to basics means measuring our activity by its relevance to what God has called us to do. In his classic book on the ministry of Jesus and His disciples, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, Robert Coleman put it this way:

"Objective and relevance - these are the crucial issues of our work. Both are interrelated, and the measure by which they are made compatible will largely determine the significance of all our activity. Merely because we are busy, or even skilled, doing something does not necessarily mean that we are getting anything accomplished. The question must always be asked. Is it worth doing? And does it get the job done?" To put this in simple terms that even I can understand- are we doing what we've been told to do?

Second, getting back to basics means asking ourselves on a regular basis: "Are we in our house church doing what Jesus told us to do?"

Third, getting back to basics means either discovering or reminding ourselves of what Jesus has commanded us to do. And what has He commanded us to do?:

"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

What's the command? Make Disciples. Yep, even in the Greek. Now, two points here. First, all of the verbs in this sentence are participles, except one. In Greek, participles are frequently used to set the stage for the action of the primary verb. Here, the participle is "Go". This isn't a command as much as it is an assumption. "As you are going". Jesus ASSUMED that His Church would obey Him and go in to all the world. Simply put, a Church - a gathering of genuine believers - that isn't going anywhere is a contradiction in terms. Let me bring this a little closer to home. If your house church isn't going anywhere, you have a Jesus-sized problem.

Second point on this verse. The verb that is not a participle is the phrase "make disciples". Jesus assumes we will be going, and along the way He commands (Imperative) us to make disciples. Someone has said that Church planting is best understood as a discipleship process that leaves a church in its wake. That's brilliant! Let me say that again. Church planting - including organic house churches - is best understood as a discipleship process that leaves a church in its wake.

This is why Jesus never preached a single message on "the Church". He didn't need to! He preached the Kingdom of God. He made disciples of the Kingdom, and that very process of discipleship which He initiated and modeled and taught left the church in its wake. You see, discipleship and the message of the Kingdom produce the Church. The Church doesn't produce either disciples or the Kingdom. You don't plant house churches and expect disciples. You make disciples and the very process of disciple making creates an organic house church in its wake. This is why Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 that He would build His Church. He already knew that the message of the Kingdom which He had preached and taught, combined with the process of discipleship which He had modeled would produce the Church. And it did. (By the way, the word "disciple" appears twice as many times in the NT as the word "church").

Want to know why we aren't planting more house churches? Because we aren't making disciples. Make disciples and you'll

plant churches. Plant churches and you may or may not get disciples. Advocates of Church growth today have a new mantra that is making the rounds. It basically says, "Planting Churches is the most effective means of evangelism". While I hope it works for them, I have to disagree, for two reasons.

First, it isn't particularly biblical. But why let a little thing like that stop you, right?

But, secondly, according to Jesus, making disciples is the most effective means of evangelism. Chapter 13 of our new book, "River Houses Rising" is entitled "God Has A Math Problem". In that chapter I demonstrate the basic problem behind the math of planting churches to do evangelism. Specifically, planting churches and simply adding people to them is a methodology that guarantees our inability to fulfill the great commission in our lifetime, or any time within the next 274,963 years! I go on to demonstrate how a simple strategy of discipleship and multiplication could reach the entire world in 11 years.

Now, here's the real kicker. How many people do we have here tonight? Let's pretend for just a moment that there are only 8 of us here tonight. Let's pretend we're a house church of only 8 people whose hair is on fire for Jesus. Now, remember those 468,684 people who live in Spokane county? How long do you think it would take a house church of 8 people to reach everyone of those people with the gospel? Answer: roughly 6 ½ years. And in the weeks to come I'm going to show you how. Here's the bottom line: Your organic house church of 8 people/families has the potential to have a greater long-term impact for reaching this city and this community and even the world with the Kingdom of God than the largest mega churches in our city COMBINED - but ONLY if your focus is upon making and multiplying reproducing disciples rather than adding participants. Adding occasional participants or "Jesus fans" to your house church is a formula for going no where.

The Christian life - including life in your organic house church - consists of many things. But the long-term success and significance of all those other things you and I do depend upon our obedience to Jesus' central command: make disciples. Life in the Church stagnates whenever and wherever our multitude of activities become disconnected from this simple command. The end result is that we spend our time preaching to the choir, fishing in an aquarium and holding pep rallies to entertain the crowd of "Jesus fans" who show up at our meetings. When we lose our focus upon making disciples by focusing upon other things, we slowly surround ourselves with fans in search of a pep rally to relieve their boredom, rather than disciples looking to take up their cross and to proclaim a kingdom.

So, Where Do We Go From Here?

Well, we need to start thinking about umbrellas, and we obviously need to become more intentional about who we are and where we're going. We also need to be thinking more seriously about what it means to raise up and equip house church leaders. What does that look like. And we begin devoting time and thought to how we get back to the basics of making disciples. If you aren't making disciples, then you're just attracting fans. And as every sports enthusiast knows, fans can be a very fickle bunch. I'm not going to have the time to share everything I would like to share on this topic tonight. I'll save some of them for our next gathering. HINT HINT! But let me offer at least one additional thought about where we go from here.

We begin gathering regularly to encourage one another and to keep each other "on task".

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:23-25)

a. Holding fast - many of you here tonight are holding on by your fingernails, both in your personal life as well as in your house church ministry. Your faith is being challenged by unbelievers, tested by circumstances and refined by the Lord. I've got good news - I just saved a bundle of money on my car insurance by switching to Geico. Just kidding! One of the purposes of gathering together as we're doing tonight is to encourage each other to "hang in there" - to "hold fast".

b. Consider - the Greek here means "thoughtful reflection". Discipleship in the church requires thoughtful reflection regarding one another and what it takes to "provoke" one another to "love and good deeds". How much time have you spent this past week or month thoughtfully reflecting on how to provoke and stimulate people in your oikos - your house church sphere of influence - to greater love and good deeds?

c. Stimulate - this is an intense word which literally means to incite or to provoke to the point of irritation. The only other place it occurs in the New Testament is Acts 15:39 to describe the contention between Paul and Barnabas. Scripture reminds us that "iron sharpens iron", but when it does, sparks fly! In a very real sense, if I'm not irritating you right now to some degree, I'm not doing my job. And if we aren't provoking and inciting one another to greater things we're not really

being a body.

d. not forsaking . . . BUT encouraging one another. Believe it or not, I tend to be a private person. I empathize with St. Jerome who retreated to a cave to translate the Latin Vulgate and watch Rome collapse. Meetings like this are actually difficult for me, but I know what God has called me to do, and I understand that these gatherings are important for the life of the house church community moving forward. Some of you will leave this gathering tonight telling yourself that you really don't need this. It is the tendency of your nature - your "ethos", to use the Greek word in this verse - to forsake or walk away from gatherings like this, telling yourself "I don't really need this". This verse is for you. I believe God's word would admonish you NOT to do that. Don't walk away. Why, because contrary to your first response - your "ethos" - you need the challenge and the encouragement of gatherings like this.