



**Development and Leadership of Organic House Churches,
and their role as healing communities.**

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Organic House Churches and Healing Communities

Development and Leadership of Organic House Churches, and their role as healing communities. Being a reworking and updating of previous work in this area, together with several totally new sections.

By Keith Smith Ph.D.

Where is the Church going?

Perhaps one of the most important questions at the beginning of the third millennium is, where is the Church going? Throughout the world we see the creaking institution of the Church, losing members and in decline. We are, we are told, living in a post-Christian age. And yet throughout the world there are undoubted signs of hope. There are the, so called, Mega Churches, in various parts of the world, and Youth Churches and other churches aimed at specific "client groups", Cell Churches, which seem to be the "Method of the moment", and probably the fastest growing group of all internationally, The House Churches or Churches that meet in homes.

Looking back, we can see what I have called "Tides of blessing", which come with increasing frequency and intensity. Since the beginning of the last century we have had, the Pentecostal renewal on the early part of the century, various revivals in the 20s, 30s, and 40s. The 50s and 60s saw a growing evangelical movement culminating in the late 60s and early 70s, with the Jesus People, when I got saved. The early and mid 70s saw the charismatic renewal, when Pentecostal worship and theology swept into the mainstream of Church life. At the same time we saw the first fruits of the new house church movement, which in most places soon degenerated into just another set of denominations. The 80s and 90s brought a rediscovery of the five fold gift ministries and well as the power of God in the miraculous, we have seen an increase in revivals in various places in the world, as well as much that could perhaps be described as pre-revival activity. And in the early years of this century have seen teachings over the Baptism and gifts of the Holy Spirit, crossing over into churches that previously had been closed to these teachings. Alongside these rising tides of blessing, has come every type of "spiritual fashion" that you can imagine, and quite a few unimaginable. New doctrines, evangelistic methods and counseling systems, with little foundation in either Biblical or scientific truth, have all floated in with the tide. More than ever we need to cling to the Bible as our authority, examining the scriptures every day to see if what is taught is true (Acts 17:11). Sadly, much of what is taught today has more to do with modern management techniques, popular psychology and even the new age movement. Whilst management techniques and psychology are not necessarily bad, when they become more important than the scriptures, they can lead the church into error, as the new age movement always does. Unfortunately these ideas have become so much part of modern thinking, we often find them hard to recognize.

So let's look at some of the major movements in the Church today. First I would like to mention Youth Churches and other churches that seek to meet the needs of a particular social

group. By and large these churches appear large and successful. Apart from churches with a particular youth emphasis, others are available for Baby-Boomers, Inner City Radicals and even Senior Citizens. These Churches do meet a need, but often at the cost of isolating the members from other social groupings amongst which they live. Recently, I attended a “Baby-Boomer” type church that found itself in the middle of an area of real social and spiritual need. Yet the concern of the members was more about the problems that they had paying the mortgages on their Huge homes, whilst nearby there were Christians in another church, where members were hard put to afford even subsidized rented accommodation. Although neighbors, they lived in different worlds. Youth churches, in a similar way do not allow the energy and zeal of youth to invigorate the whole Church in a locality, neither can the wisdom and experience of age touch the youth. I know that this can sometimes be a difficult area, but I feel that taking one whole group out of the reckoning is hardly a scriptural argument. The problem with these “Client-Centered” churches, is that they are formed for purely pragmatic reasons, rather than following scriptural patterns. I am not saying that youth etc should not have their groups in which to relate, just that this should not be the sole basis of Church-Life.

Mega-Churches are also in the news. It seems that in some circles if your church doesn't have 1,000 plus members, you've missed the boat. In some parts of the world there are churches of tens of thousands of members, and we have all here of Pastor Cho's 1,000,000 church in Seoul, South Korea. Through these churches many have come to faith and enjoy stirring worship and world class teaching, Valiant attempts have been made to encourage home groups, but the question remains; is it possible to have fellowship with 1,000,000 people, or even 100,000, or even 1,000. The answer is clearly no. I have led churches with up to 400 members, and have to say that it is hard to have real fellowship with more than about 20. So what do we do? We start home groups, and encourage folk to attend home groups mid-week, for fellowship. But the truth is, in most places less than 40% attend these groups. Because the emphasis is always on the big meeting the folk are lost in a big pool, rarely if ever having their needs met. A few years ago my wife and I had the opportunity to see how one of these churches operated close-up. A young Korean missionary arrived in the town where we were working, in Northern Spain. She spoke hardly any Spanish at all, (less than a British tourist in Benidorm, or an American tourist in Tijuana). But as she spoke some English, the local church leaders asked Elaine and I to “keep an eye on her” and help her however we could. She was given two tasks by her church, first to start a branch church for Koreans living in the area. She was to do this by inviting them to meetings where she would play videos of their pastor in Korea. Everything including praise, worship and prayers was on the videos, the people who came to the meetings were no more than spectators, who were then expected to tithe and more to the work. The missionary was expected to be a sub-pastor to this group, but was never allowed to teach or share, all of that came on video from Korea. Her second task was to start a Spanish Church, within six months. It is hard to imagine how hard this task is even for missionaries with perfect Spanish, coming from similar cultures. But for someone with no Spanish coming from a radically different culture it is almost impossible. I know that the Lord can do whatever he wants, but in this case it was clearly just a church working by it's “method”. Fortunately she was also taken under the wing of a young Korean couple who attended our church. They helped her buy her necessities and deal with the administration. But from the very beginning we saw problems. The Koreans who attended her meetings were divided amongst themselves, which put a great pressure on her, especially as some wrote to Korea criticizing her work. Instead of supporting their missionary, the church put her under more pressure. She increasingly became depressed and withdrawn, spending days at a time closed in her flat. She said that she was praying and fasting, but, in reality she was

showing classic symptoms of depression. The times that she spent with us, (we insisted on two mornings per week) subtly changed from times of prayer and mutual encouragement into sessions to deal with her increasing depression. At her request, I wrote to Korea, explaining the difficulty of her task here, in the light of Spanish social and cultural differences. Their response was interesting, seeming to have more to do with a multinational business than a Church. They sent her more money, and a bigger and better computer and video system. Obviously this did nothing to help her emotional and spiritual needs, which by this time were being almost entirely met through the young Korean couple, Elaine and I. At the end of about four months the pressure from the Korean Mega Church increased. They were concerned that she had still not yet started the “native” church. She tried to explain that there were already three Spanish churches in the town, and that these churches met the needs of the town, but the home-church said that as we were not part of their organization she was keeping blessing from the people there. She told us that she was going to enter into an extended time of prayer and fasting. We said OK, but we still wanted to see her twice a week, and the Korean couple would call in to see her every night with juices and tea, to keep an eye on her health (the husband was a doctor). After two weeks she missed an appointment with us, but sent a note saying that she was going to visit a friend in another town. For ten days neither we nor the other couple had any contact with her. Then the couple came to see us, saying that a neighbor had heard sounds coming from her flat. With the agreement of the owner, we broke into the flat, and found a lamentable scene. She had been closed up there for the whole time, “fasting and praying”, she was in a state of almost total mental and physical collapse, and there was evidence that she had even attempted suicide. We considered sending her to the local mental hospital, but decided against as she would not be able to communicate there. The wife of the Korean family moved in with her, the doctor and I visited twice a day, until she began to recover. With our help she wrote to Korea explaining what had happened. Their response was to send a ticket ordering her to return to Korea straight away. And an order for a transport company to send all of her things to Korea straight away. At her request I wrote a complete report on the physical, mental and spiritual condition for the doctors that she was sure would be waiting for her on her return. We took her to the airport, and that was the last we saw of her. The local ministers fraternal decided to write to her home-church, raising some important questions about their missionary method, and their lack of care and understanding for this young woman. Needless to say they never replied, after all, they were the biggest church in the world, who were 8 church leaders from another country to question them. This sad story has an even sadder post-script, about two months later we received a letter from the missionary, saying that on her return, she was taken to the churches mission headquarters, where they had spent a long time telling her off, saying that she had bought shame and a bad image on her church. They then dismissed her from her job, and threw her out of the church. No medical or psychological help was offered. She was out. Fortunately, she had a friend who invited her to live in her house until she was able to recover and seek work and fellowship elsewhere. This is just one story, affecting one church, but such stories are not rare to folk who have been on the Christian scene any time, as is witnessed by the popularity of Frank Peretti’s novel, “The Visitation”, which features a typical Mega-Church in its story line.

Another type of church that seems to be breaking ground today is the so called “Cell Churches”, sometimes known as “G12” Churches. Much has been written about this type of church during the past few years. They have been heralded as the “second reformation”, being a new or reformed way of looking at the local church, putting it once again in its New Testament context. Many have begun the painful task of transforming their church structure into a cell church. Some, having done it, have seen impressive, multiplying growth, others have

continued much as in the past, only with a new structure. Not a few have fallen by the wayside, either giving up on the changes or closing altogether. The churches that have not seen growth or have fallen aside are in a clear majority, and the assertions from the cell church lobby, that they have not properly implemented cell church principles, just do not hold water. I believe that those whom I have chosen to call the cell church lobby, have clearly heard the heart of God for the church in these last days, but the rigidity of their “vision” and their lack of flexibility have caused impossible strains in many local churches, stifling growth and occasionally causing irreparable ruptures. First of all I want to look at what is a cell church is. Then what are the stress factors that cause it to fail? And finally is there a way ahead? What is an organic church and how does it grow?

What is a Cell-Church?

In his excellent book “The Second Reformation”, William A. Beckham provides an overview of what is a cell-church. As I am sure that I cannot improve upon his work, the following outline is drawn largely from his book. He accurately describes the post Constantine Church as

- People go to a building (cathedral)
- on a special day of the week (Sunday)
- and someone (a priest, or today, a pastor)
- does something to them (teaching, preaching, absolution or healing)
- or for them (a ritual or entertainment)
- for a price (offerings)

This sort of church, although common today, is clearly far from the New Testament ideal. The Cell Church Movement describe their vision of the New Testament Church as a “Cell Church”, that is, a Church where the basic unit is a small cell group of believers. In his book William Beckham describes the New Testament Church as conforming to seven tests:

1. The institutional test. Is the church a living organism or an organization? If you were to do away with the building and the Sunday morning meeting, could the church survive? If the church would survive without a building and Sunday morning meetings, it passes the first test for a New Testament cell church.

2. The cell test. Is a small group (referred to in this book as a cell) considered the church in nature, purpose and power? Does the church see the small group as the basic Christian community and the essential unit of the church? If leaders and people would cringe at referring to the small group as the church, then that church is not a New Testament cell church. Paul himself had no problem calling groups in the homes churches.

3. The photocopy test. - When the model is reproduced, is the new church as clear and bright as the original? Will the model transfer? If the church replicates itself with only dimmer versions of itself, then it is not a New Testament cell church. This is not a numerical test but a test of nature and life. Does it consistently reproduce the dynamic of the original?

4. The simplicity test. Is the church fragmented and complex? As it grows larger, does it get more complex or less complex? Does it take a CEO to make it work? A cell church will continue to operate through its simple cell leadership structure even if the governing administrative framework disappears. Even with the presence of large numbers of members and leaders, the cell church will have a simplicity about how it operates.

5. The multiplication test. - Does the church show hope of multiplying? Is a structure in place through which dynamic growth could happen? Or is the strategy based on addition of new members a cell church can systematically multiply because the point of growth takes place at the integrated cell level, not through compartmentalized multiple programs.

6. The adult test. Does the church reach new adult converts, or is the church sustained by transfer growth from other churches and biological growth, by baptizing its own children? An operating cell church will reach new adult converts.

7. The persecution test. Will the church survive if it is forced underground? Could the kind of small groups attached to our church programs survive persecution without the institutional cushion? The cell church will survive through its New Testament cells no matter what happens politically, socially, economically or internally.”

I do not necessarily agree with all of these tests, as I feel that some are based upon false assumptions rather than on the word of God.

Later in the book the author indicates a number of signs of a cell church:

- “The cell church Jesus designed operates as the church not only on Sunday, but on the other six days of the week as well.
- The cell church may have a building, but the building is functional and not sacred.
- The growth of the church doesn’t depend on how much square footage can be financed and provided. The building formula of the cell church is grow and then build.
- Cells or small groups of Christians meet in homes during the week and are the basic unit of the church.
- These cells act as the “delivery system” of the church through which cell members live out the gospel in the world.
- Every member of the church receives equipping for the work of the ministry in these small groups.
- Celebration worship on Sunday overflows from the body life, taking place during the week in the lives of members.
- Members are accountable to each other.
- The cell church produces large numbers of servant leaders who enable the work of ministry to take place at the basic: cell level.
- In the small groups, members take off their masks and receive edification and healing. Real New Testament fellowship takes place.
- The “one another” passages found in the New Testament have a context in which they can be experienced.
- The church centered in home cells is designed to survive persecution.
- The lost are reached through cell friendship evangelism.
- Spiritual (Gifts essential for edification, equipping and evangelism are released in the natural setting of the cells.
- Full-time leaders are set aside for prayer and to seek (God’s face for the body.
- Multiplication of cells, converts, disciples and leaders constantly occurs.
- Operating cell churches have a dramatic impact upon the society. Their small groups touch the hurts and needs in the world around them.

- Leaders and pastors provide oversight, vision, and accountability for leaders of the cell groups.
- More money is available for ministry and missions as each member matures in their understanding of stewardship as a lifestyle.
- The Community of cells is a place of healing for the individual and the family.
- The administration of the church is simplified around the basic cell unit. This significantly reduces the multiple programs necessary to run a traditional church,
- Primary care for members is provided at the cell level Instead of the professional Staff level.
- Ephesians 4:12 works! Leaders “equip the saints for the work of ministry.”

Many within the cell church movement seek to draw links between their movement and the base communities common in some parts of South America, and growing out of liberation theology. In his book, Mr. Beckham quotes the Brazilian theologian, J. B. Libanio. “They are not a movement, an association or a religious congregation ... They are not a method (or the only method) of building up the church: they are the church itself. They are not a miraculous recipe for all the ills of society and the church. They are the church renewing itself . . . They are not a utopia; they are a sign of the kingdom, though they are not the kingdom They are not messianic, but they can be prophetic and produce prophets like the church should. They are not a natural ... community ... identified with a race, language, people, family . . . They are the church

They are not a protest group, although their life is a protest against the mediocrity, sloth and inauthenticity of many... They are not special groups for special people. They are the church committed to the ordinary man, to the poor, to those who suffer injustice ... They are not closed: they are open to dialogue with all. They are not a reform of anything in pastoral work: they are a decisive pastoral option, made in order to construct a new image of the church.” Although there are clear similarities between the two sorts of group there are also clear differences, the base communities coming much closer to the ideal of the organic church as they avoiding every way the rigid structuralization of the cell church.

Lets us move on to see this rigidity that causes the cell churches to fail...

Stresses that cause cell churches to fail:

1) It’s a system and these sorts of systems are like straightjackets for the Spirit of God. God is constantly renewing and refreshing the church, yet any system will lose its life after a while. We can clearly see this in the Methodist Church, which in its early life was vital and lively, with much of its life based in small groups (classes) yet within 100 years, was in need of renewal and refreshing. Whenever we take a clear move of God and turn it into a system or method, then we sign its death warrant. God wants us to work depending on Him and His grace, not on a system, method or denomination. When we divert our attention from Him to a system, He stops blessing.

2) It builds uneven or unstable structures. Often cell churches grow in an uneven way over an unstable base. The core leaders are not sufficiently equipped within their character to

support the growth occurring in their celebrations. At the same time parts of the church grow at different rates often emphasizing the insufficiencies of the leaders.

3) Its structure is pyramidal and does not represent the true image of New Testament servant leaders. The Senior Pastor is on top of a pyramid of Zone Pastors, Area Pastors, Local Pastors, and Members. The Local (cell) Pastors although said to be real pastors are subject to a whole infrastructure of authority.

4) Inappropriate leaders, seeking to fulfill their own goals, as opposed to group goals, often lead to splits.

5) It falsely describes itself. It says that the real church is each individual cell, however talks of churches of 10,000 people. If what they say is true, it is legitimate to claim celebrations or communities of 10,000 people, but each church is more or less 12 people, and the 10,000 represents the church in that area, but only if it includes other denominational groups and churches within its make-up and local church leaders are seen as equals. It is true, however, that within any group of leaders some will be more spiritually gifted than others, or speak with more spiritual authority, yet the authority of a local church rests on the shoulders of the local elders, who subsequently are responsible for decisions taken on behalf of the church.

These stress areas cause an inherent instability in various areas leading to unhappiness, frustration and eventually splits, caused by:

- Disagreements over policy
- Disagreements over doctrinal stresses
- New leaders not being allowed to develop
- Unattractive leaders not given a place “Problem people” being sidelined until they leave.
- People with problems never finding the true solution as they stay in a permanent evangelistic cell instead of a growing more or less permanent group which becomes the loving environment where they will encounter Jesus, the answer to their need.
- Prophetic words or leads never really being communicated to the whole structure, therefore prophetic ministries feel frustrated and eventually leave.
- Leaders without necessary character traits.
- Abusive behavior of core leaders who must maintain the structure and therefore manipulate or otherwise abuse members into cooperation. Mustage and oughtery (“You must do this and ought to do that.” with no scriptural basis).
- Failure of members to mature.

Let me give an illustration of an imaginary situation, but made up from several situations I know personally. St. A’s church in Bigtown received its new minister in January, two years ago. It was a middle of the road evangelical/charismatic church of about 80+ members. The minister introduced the elders and deacons to cell churches and it was enthusiastically agreed that it would change to a cell church structure. Within the first year the cells were up and functioning,

although 20 people decided to go elsewhere or stopped coming altogether. The elders considered that 25% fall out was acceptable in the light of multiplication growth to come.

At the beginning of the second year a significant prophetic leader in the church left, taking with him his cell and one other. They felt (correctly?) that the minister was more interested in his structure than what God might be saying.

In the middle of the year all remaining cells had shown significant growth and the church had made up all its losses. However, when the leaders tried to put in place new cells and some new leaders, several people left, either because they were being separated from friends and loved ones, or because their leadership was not recognized.

Now, two years after the start of the exercise, the 3 youth cells have announced that they are leaving to start a youth church, as they were never listened to. The cell led by an elder has dissolved due to an unresolved sin problem. And the minister is manipulating and cajoling members to comply with the system, calling those who have left rebels and jezebels, creating a sense of fear among the members, who will conform so as not to be rebellious.

So in two years all that has been created is a sick church with members not really owning the vision, and a minister driving himself and his sheep to fulfill the very vision (structure) which is causing the sickness.

Is there a way ahead?

The undoubted answer is yes. As I said at the beginning, I believe whole heartedly that the “cell church lobby” have heard the heart of God for His church in these last days, but it is the stresses and strains outlined in the previous section that eventually lead to a topping out or rupture in a cell church.

Therefore the question really is, how can we create a church that is flexible but without the rigid structure of the cell churches as we know them?

I believe the answer to be in what I choose to call “organic churches” but are better known as House Churches, Home Churches or Simple Churches. These have a similar starting place as that which motivates the cell churches, of small, inter-personal groups, which grow, multiply, and divide. It is without doubt the cell or individual House Church, which is the gift of God, but it is after this level that things begin to look rather different. As in our bodies, not all cells perform the same function; neither are all cells the same size. Different cells with different functions differ in size and form. It is the same with house churches and their related networks. For example, not all House Churches (Hereafter HCs) will have as their function evangelism, some will act like the body’s defense cells, surrounding and absorbing “problems” and then helping these people to overcome their problems or sins and leave as functioning church members. Other HCs will have particular emphasis like support work (Practical), Youth, or Children. Others may be particularly mission minded. Yet others will be stabilizers or structural, or creative.

The church is not just recognized at HC level but at each higher stage too. Expressing it another way, the church is like DNA, leaving the imprint of the whole at the cellular level. Therefore, in an area we would expect to find Individual HCs-amoebae, networks composed of a few HCs— simple life and networks composed of multiple HCs — complex life. Yet all are part

of the Church in that area or town

These churches would inter-react among themselves to form congregations and, in relation with other groups, trans-local celebrations, which will be the true expression of the local church, and where apostolic, prophetic and other ministries could address the church as a whole.

Leaders work locally (perhaps in the context of more than one congregation) ministering in the word and prayer and Ephesians 4:12 equipping. The church life functions at all levels because the DNA imprint exists at all levels and no one is claiming proprietorial rights. That is, no one says “This is mine (Acts 2:4). The church belongs to Jesus. “All to Jesus I surrender”.

Each network, be it a lone HCs, few-HCs or multipl-HCs will have responsible, authoritative leaders (Elders). These would meet with elders of HCs and leaders of other church groups within the area.

I am convinced that the cell church movement has heard from God in its emphasis, but has demonstrated how its “straight-jacketed structure” works against the free flow of the Holy Spirit. As we bow the knee, we allow the Holy Spirit to burn up structure, so that we can move into the creative liberty that the Father gives us, each Cell or House Church forming together the beautiful organism that is the Body of Christ.

So, how would such a church work?

If we first look at an HC started from scratch, then later we can look more closely at how a traditional church or cell church can be transformed into a HC.

In church planting situations the church planters would start a single House Church. Through their ministry, testimony and invitation, others would be added to that HC. It is natural that nearly all the initial members would relate closely to the original church planters, but as the group grows we would begin to see different natural groupings within the cell. It is normal that when a group gets to about 20 natural secondary groupings appear. In traditional structures these secondary groupings would be seen as negative cliques, in a HC each person would have been taught the need for the right character in spiritual leaders. Therefore when the church planters note the natural groupings they should look for the natural leaders of these groupings. Then in consultation with others they should examine their characters in the light of the scriptural qualifications for leadership. If they fit the descriptions in 1 Timothy and Titus, they should be recognized and encouraged to split away from the original group, whilst still maintaining a good relationships and meeting together At least once per month. The new leaders would also meet in a leadership discipleship group with apostolic leaders.

If the “natural’ leaders of a group do not have the necessary character qualifications, they should gently be told, and shown that if they submit their characters to God, then in the future they would perhaps be ideal leaders or co—leaders. In this way you turn possible problems of dissatisfaction into strong supporters of the work. Because everyone understands the need of right leaders, this leads to support and encouragement for folk who are working hard with God to achieve positive character change. These potential future leaders should be encouraged to attend leadership discipleship but alongside or as assistants to proven leaders.

The size of the individual HCs is not as important as is made out by the cell church

movement. I believe that 4, as a minimum is practical, as less than 4 can defeat the object of growth. But I don't believe that there is any reason to put an upper limit on the size of group. I have seen cells of up to 30 working well, with a deep and real fellowship among the members. I believe that the only reason for a cell to split is that the cell is ready, that is, there are clear and deep sub—groupings within the HC and those sub-groupings have clear, qualified leaders. When these sub-groups form and leaders are available I feel that the sooner separation takes place, the better for the spiritual health of all.

The separation of HCs is always difficult, as close friends do not wish to be separated. However, I believe that these separations can be made less painful in several ways: (1) Stress should be placed on the links with the members of other HCs, which we have in congregational and celebration meetings. (2) Inter-HC social activities should be encouraged —Barbecues, Picnics, Games, Evenings, etc. (3) HCs should be seen as open groups, not closed. Therefore if Miss A, who is in X's cell also wishes to visit Y's cell with her friend B, then why not? Just as long as each person knows their cell where they receive care and the leaders respect that. (4) At the end, before final separation, the groups should be encouraged to do things separately within the original group. For example, discussing separately the study of the day or praying in groups. All of these things help in the transition from one group to two or three.

The resulting HCs would normally remain within the same congregation. However when a group reaches around 180, natural stresses and groupings begin to appear. Therefore when this happens, the leaders should encourage splitting into two congregations, preferably geographically. However the two congregations would continue to share together within the framework of celebration meetings. It would be simple to see this as the typical cell church pyramid. But there are key differences (1) flexibility of cells. (2) Leadership and (3) inter—leadership relationships.

The flexibility of the HCs is fundamental. No HC is totally like another although all share the same nucleus vision within the local church. The cell is the local church and should be allowed to develop as the Lord guides. Other leaders, together with the HC leaders, will seek the Lord for direction for the HC. The leaders would also be aware of the prophetic and apostolic direction. However, the responsible leaders of the HC **are** the real leaders!

Leadership Dynamics within an organic Church

The key to HC growth are the leaders, their openness, giftedness, brokenness, and willingness to serve without self-interest. You will notice immediately that the majority of these are character traits. Nearly all leadership problems in the church can be put down to faulty characters. It is imperative that a church leader has a grace—transformed character.

In the beginning God created man in his own image. The body, soul and spirit of man were in perfect equilibrium, until man sinned and thus died spiritually, leaving just the body and soul which strive continually to feed and satisfy themselves.

Both of these parts of man are self-centered: the body seeking fleshly or carnal satisfaction, and the soul intellectual or emotional satisfaction. It is only in Christ that His Spirit living in us begins to restore the equilibrium that was enjoyed by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It is only when we are enjoying this equilibrium, this "life in the Spirit", that we have the power to live,

move and minister in a Christ—like way, thinking first of God and then others before my needs. For this reason the most apt leaders are those who clearly demonstrate that they have characters that are being conformed to Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. How can we find these leaders? First, we must forget our stereotypes of leaders. In several churches I know a young man is not seen as a potential leader until he adopts a certain mode of dress, or speech pattern or begins to relate unquestioningly to a leader or denomination. Secondly, we must not confuse education with maturity. I know many highly-educated leaders, who are in reality spiritual babes (or worse still not yet started in the Christian life) and others who whilst having little or no formal training have a wonderful grasp on the things of God.

Above all, a leader needs to be seen as a “man of God”, able to relate simply and humbly, both to his flock and to his peers. In his character he must be clear and open, his life demonstrating his reliance on Christ. In terms of gifting, we must carefully discriminate those parts that come from his training and those parts that come from God. Because of the perversity of this world, learnt things will always contain a taint of that perversity. However, that which comes from God is good and pure. A leader must have Spirit-lead motives for his service, and never be led astray by ambition, money, or desires of self—fulfillment. You may think that I am describing an impossible ideal. However, it is my experience that everyone within God’s family has the ability to lead at some level or another. The only requirement is our death to self so that we can live in the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we would have more success if we stopped looking for leaders and started to help some of the “failures” or “pains in the neck” in our churches to find enough security in Jesus so that they can humble themselves and lay down long enough to die. But perhaps before that happens, those of us already in leadership need to do some more dying.

A question I was once asked is if I loved God and the Church enough to turn my back and walk away, leaving all in the hands of God and inexperienced leaders. I thank God that I was able to, because the small church that I left, instead of becoming reliant on my faith, later became a strong, missionary-sending church. There is a part of all of us that would like to lead a successful 3000+ member church, and perhaps God will call you to that, but until then let us be happy within small inter-relating groups.

The leadership relationships at the congregation and celebration levels are important. In scripture I do not find people relating pyramidically. Pyramid structures always leave senior leaders with too much authority and too little accountability. Some people look to wheel structures with similar interests grouping around a common hub. This allows for better interaction and communication, but once again fails because of insufficient accountability. It also makes the church inward looking, centred on structure.

The structure that I find most helpful is the so called “net model”, Local leaders, plus other recognised ministries, would be at the end of each thread of the net, with like ministries being grouped together. As items arise within the group, those with any interest would pull at their thread, thus inclining the net towards them. The group would then look towards that person or those persons to take the lead. Sometimes there will be two, three or more people tensing the thread at the same time. This leads to only those with a real interest in the matter Taking decisions whilst the others are free to give counsel, and then follow the consensus of the group.

The aim of this type of model is always consensus; “It seems good to us and the Holy Spirit... “. Tyrants and dictators find it impossible to work within this type of network, as others will pull at their threads to prevent their worse excesses, thus creating an equilibrium. This is a leadership model for real servants, people prepared to lay down their lives for the sheep and each other.

But it cannot be over-stressed, that the authority within each HC, rests with their elders, who are there to persuade and help the brothers to make decisions rather than order.

What happens if things go wrong? The constant emphasis on good teaching 1 Tim. 3 and Lev. 19 etc. should mean that every church member is spiritually equipped to see problems before they occur. The emphasis on accountability both within the leadership and within each group will also mitigate against real problems arising. If the leaders cannot resolve a problem it would be better for them to leave it in the hands of God and separate themselves from the problem, whilst at all times leaving a way back for any people involved.

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Transforming a traditional Church into an Organic Church Network

Stage 1- Education. Sharing with the church and beginning to teach House Church principles.

Stage 2- Preparation. The leaders (Pastor and others) seek the natural groupings within the church. If their natural leaders are not yet within the leadership structure they begin to incorporate them, if suitable, they help and equip any that may not yet be suitable

Stage 3- Grouping. The Church begins to meet midweek in House Churches. At the same time the pastor seeks to promote the ministries of new HC leaders during Sunday meetings.

Stage 4- Recognition. Recognition of the House Churches as true expressions of the local church. The pastor steps down from leadership of the whole group, instead becoming another HC leader, although probably still being supported by the giving of the whole congregation.

Stage 5- Organic Life. From this point the groups begin to operate in the way described in the text, although it's probable that there will always be a strong connection between these groups and their former pastor.

Part 2

The Apostolic Planting of House Church Networks

As I work more than anything else in the area of Church planting and development, I have often been asked by others working in the field to spell out how one could plant a new House Church Network.

This type of Church Planting should always start with your family, where you are. Whilst it is possible to use this method in new areas, it works best in a place where you are to some extent known. For example, anybody trying to apply the following method as a newcomer to a town in Spain, where I work, would find that they either had poor results or weak commitments. I will give some suggestions for people starting in totally new situations at the end on this article.

Your family is the beginning of the first HC, perhaps with one or two others who have joined you to start the new church. From the very beginning you should stress informality and your commitment to the others in the group (thus mirroring a commitment that you want to see in them, although you may never demand it). It is vital that you bring no preconceived ideas with you into the group, only the Bible may be your guide. If you don't like dancing in church you must learn to love it, because God thinks it's neat. If you don't like people falling over, then you're going to have to argue with God if it starts to happen in your group. You must do nothing to stop any Biblical move that comes into your Church. If you can't live with that idea, then please don't even try to plant a House Church, because you will probably fail and will almost certainly damage any who enter the poor misshapen thing that you may produce. The Holy Spirit is life, and He will certainly not be constrained to your ideas, or mine.

Add 1 or 2 new people at a time (not necessarily believers, but open seekers). Your main thrust at the beginning should be making new contacts and friends, whilst at the same time maintaining those that you have for evangelization within the group. Remember, new folk always bring others with them. Where you make new contacts will depend very much on the culture within which you minister. For example, the Apostles went to the market places. Whilst we lived in Eastbourne we made many useful contacts and friends in the local launderette. Later, when I had a part-time job in a health food store, our contacts came from the clients there. Still later I headed up a counselling centre and almost all of our contacts came from there. Here in Spain, things are somewhat different. Most people meet and make new friends and contacts in bars where people drop in at all times of day and night to have a coffee or a drink. One of the most widely heard criticisms of (especially American) missionaries here in Spain is their failure to understand that bars are where you make contacts in this culture (I even met one missionary that was forbidden by his mission board to enter a bar). WHEREVER PEOPLE NORMALLY MAKE FRIENDS IS WHERE YOU SHOULD BE. I once knew a very shy person who liked hiking, and joined a rambling club. Within a few months she had told everyone in the club about her faith and two or three went to her house a couple of times a week to look at the Bible and/or watch Christian videos. Within a year every member of the rambling club had become a Christian, and she had a sizeable cell- church meeting in her home. You don't have to be an extroverted "go-getter" to plant churches; you just have to share the most precious thing that you have, your faith.

At the beginning, don't have "meetings", just informal get-togethers in the evenings and at

weekends. Naturally share your faith, as you have the opportunity, teaching by example. Other things you teach as need arises. For example, pray for the needs of folk. In this way you teach prayer, trust in God and that God answers prayer, all at the same time. Vary the content of your get-togethers; watch a video (Christian or secular - secular videos are great conversation starters). Talk about current affairs in the light of God's Word, read the Bible, Listen to Christian music, rather than sing praise and worship, which should be a heart response to god and will naturally flow as the folk learn to trust God. Have practical discussion Bible studies, what does the Bible say about marriage, our work etc. You should pray naturally in the group about peoples real and specific needs (not just God bless Dolly, but God, please heal Dolly's in-growing toenail and help her to stop being so crabby).

Your meetings should be natural, not organised. Not just once a week, but everyday as need arises (Acts 2:46). As the group grows encourage members to open their homes, and move from house to house. Some have thought this a weakness, because the reason for the group (to be a church) may become diverted by a new couple, but in my experience this can easily be corrected when they next meet in your home (which should be the most regular meeting place anyway). There is a small risk of losing some, but this risk is worth it for the saints to be able to live in the liberty of God.

When the group size reaches 10 to 12 you should consider starting a regular Bible study plan. This should be foundational teaching for the new church and should include: "what is a Christian?" living and growing in the faith, the local church (Organic church principles as explained in the first part of this book) etc. other subjects you should tackle as they come up, not what you think people need but their real, voiced needs. I would recommend MTS (See www.robertfitts.com for details) others have used Alpha Course. These studies will be the first step towards a more organized approach and should be handled sensitively to find a time and place suitable for all. These studies should not be a straight teach. It is obvious that the folk will look to you as leader, but each person should be encouraged to contribute what they have found in the Bible, or even their own personal point of view, but always balanced by the Word of God.

There should be a continual influx of people as a result of active outreaches (Alpha courses, open-air, evangelistic meals, etc) and as present members introduce friends and relatives. As these new people come along, they should be immediately incorporated into the group. If a beginners group happens to become particularly close knit, there is no reason why this should not become an associated cell straight away, thus precipitating the formation of the congregational level.

By this time your teaching programme should be tackling the local church and the sacraments. As far as the local church is concerned, one must stress that a small group without a grand building is a valid expression of the local church and that all true believers are priests apt to minister to God (whatever their cultural backgrounds may say). They need to be taught that authority normally resides with the elders, who will inform and consult with the members about important issues. Those who exercise ministries of the Holy Spirit should be seen as the gifts to the church that they are, and not as some sort of pope or bishop.

As far as the sacraments are concerned, I believe that many Churches fail in this area, either the sacraments are moved to the congregational level, thus making that the real

expression of the church, rather than the HC. Or, on the other hand, some try to “do it” like the “church down the road”, therefore introducing an unnecessary formality into a group.

Baptism can best be performed within the family atmosphere of the HC, with other leaders and friends to participate too. If several HCs have people to baptize at the same time, then the leaders can agree to have a congregational activity. For example all of the cells could meet in a local park for a baptismal service. The candidates would be baptized by a recognized local ministry (Apostle, Prophet or Evangelist) and one of their HC leaders. Later all could share a communal meeting (Agape) with other members of their HC, whilst having social interaction with other HCs.

Holy Communion should almost always be celebrated within the cell, as it has its roots in the Passover meal, which was always celebrated in the family and never communally. Thus it is normal that in a HC communion would be celebrated as part of a real meal shared together. It is hard to justify Communion in large gatherings. Perhaps the only thing I can think of is when there is a need for a corporate demonstration of unity (e.g. when new churches come into the congregation/celebration, when new leaders or ministers are recognized in the wider group, etc.)

Another significant move at about this time will be the possible separation of the original HC into two or more new HCs. This is a vital time in the new group. Stress should be placed on our congregational unity and not on “splitting into smaller groups”. I often use the illustration of a gardener planting seeds. As the seeds grow in the seed tray the gardener carefully transfers the tender seedlings to another situation where they can grow on with more room, sometimes having to transplant them again before they are put into their final position. I have written in part 1 that friends should wherever possible be kept together at this time. In stressing our congregational unity we will obviously have to start a congregational meeting. Look for a suitable meeting place in the community that can be hired on a weekly or fortnightly basis (a community centre, school, library, lounge of a pub or hotel or a restaurant) and then start your meeting with some sort of special celebration, to which you can invite the press and local authorities, thus announcing your presence to the wider community.

By now the growth of the church should follow the lines I put forward in part one, eventually leading to celebration meetings and wider growth.

I did say earlier that I would say something about folk who are starting in entirely new situations. If you find yourself in this position, perhaps you are a missionary or church planter, spend your first six to twelve months just getting to know the lie of the land. As much as possible involve yourself in community activities (My wife and I are on the local town twinning committee). Make friends, and contacts, do “normal” things. Let those around you see your faith as a natural part of your life. Only when you have the confidence of the people can you then move to the next step. In some cultures this can take a long time. In our present situation in northern Spain it has taken us about three years to become accepted as part of the town, In another place it took us six months, on a new estate in Eastbourne, Sussex, it took us only a month or two. Don't worry about the time periods that I am mentioning Paul often spent a long time in the places he visited. Looking back on our past work, I find that the Lord moves us on

every 2 to 6 years. You must be sensitive to the Spirit. Once you are established, then continue as above.

Money Matters:

I don't intend writing a treatise on tithing and church finance, but I would like to put forward some comments on finance in an House Church network.

Fairly early on, teaching should be given on Tithes and Offerings. From the very beginning you should have in your house a box where you, and if they want, your guests can put their offerings. You won't need to draw attention to it, just put the box in a visible area with a discreet notice, saying something like, "offerings towards God's work". Later, if asked, you can expand on what the money is used for; Bible-study material, videos, a bag of shopping for old Mrs X, etc. When you later teach on giving, you will find it much easier if your folk can see that it has a practical end. It should be emphasised that we also share with those who minister among us (NUM 18:21), "we gave money to "X" so that he doesn't have to work and can spend his time in prayer, Bible study and ministry to us and others." It is vital that your folk understand that when we support ministries financially, we are not employing someone to do a job, but quite the reverse. We are paying someone so that they don't have to do ordinary work, thus allowing them time to study, pray and then minister to us. You should stress that this doesn't mean that we are paying them to be lazy, or lead a frivolous life, and that the ministers are responsible both to God and His Church for how they use their time. When talking about offerings, stress should be placed on the responsibility of each member to cover the expenses of the local church.

Offerings should be used to pay the day-to-day expenses of the Church, to buy equipment and property as needed, and as a help fund for members in need. Many churches give a tithe of their offerings to missions.

In the Bible, tithes are clearly used to pay for the ministry. In an Organic Church most ministers will work in secular employment, whilst a few will be full-time. There should be a good deal of love and respect when it comes to deciding who should be full-time and how much they should be paid. I feel that these matters are best settled by the ministers and cell leaders together, although it seems logical to me that a cell leader who has no other responsibilities could quite well work in secular employment as well, whilst a cell leader who also ministers to other cells within the congregation or celebration should be supported at least partially through the tithes.

Sometimes, I am asked how much a minister should be paid. Some say twice the average wage of the group (basing themselves in the scripture 1Tim.5: 17). Others say that they should earn at least the average wage of the group, whilst amazingly some still think that ministers should live in penury. I personally believe that leaders should be paid at a level equal to the upper third of the church in which they minister, plus expenses and an allowance towards their office, transport and hospitality expenses. But clearly each case is different and should be put before the Lord. Ministers should not be "in the ministry" for their benefits package. Equally no church should fail in their responsibilities towards those who minister to them.

REMEMBER, CHRISTIANS ARE TO BE GENEROUS BECAUSE GOD GENEROUSLY SAVED THEM!
NEVER LET MONEY PROBLEMS STOP THE WORK OF THE CHURCH!
NEVER ARGUE ABOUT MONEY!

Scriptural Church Life - Home Churches in the Bible

One of the best images of a House Church Network in the Bible is not found in the New Testament, but in the Old. We find it in Jethro's advice to his son-in-law Moses, in Exodus 18:13 – 26NIV; *¹³The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. ¹⁴When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"*

¹⁵Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will. ¹⁶Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws."

¹⁷Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. ¹⁹Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. ²⁰Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. ²¹But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. ²²Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. ²³If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

²⁴Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. ²⁵He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. ²⁶They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

We have all seen mega-churches where one man wears himself out ministering to the flock. It is only when there is a leadership team that this can be avoided. When that team is operative at every level of church life and includes a good percentage of church members it leads to a dynamic of church life that is rarely seen otherwise.

From the point of view of House Churches it is interesting to note that these judges acted with a large degree of autonomy. They decided when to bring problems to the apostolic / prophetic leaders. There was no pyramidal structure. Each judge related directly to the apostolic / prophetic leaders. Also there was a variety of sizes of groups to whom they ministered, 100's, 50's and 10's. Whilst House Churches operate with small groups rarely exceeding 12 – 15 people, I feel that I have adequately demonstrated that individual HCs can be of any size, and that their size relates to the gifting of their leaders and other factors rather than to any arbitrary upper limit. Another interesting point is that there were already other groupings in existence, in that everyone was already part of a tribe. Perhaps it would be helpful to see the connections laid out more clearly:

HCs	=	10's, 50's and 100's
Congregation	=	Tribe
Celebration	=	People (of Israel)

Moving to the New Testament, we find that although the early Christians met centrally every day they also fellowshiped in each other's homes, presumably in small groups. *Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, (Acts 2:46NIV).* After Peter was released from prison

it was natural for him to go to one of the known meeting places of the Church, and naturally there he found the church in action. *When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. (Acts 12:12NIV)* In Caesarea too, we find Paul and Silas upon their release from prison, making their way to Lydia's house, where the church met, so that the Brethren could help and encourage one another. *After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left. (Acts 16:40NIV).*

When it comes to the question of various home based churches meeting in one town, we had better look at Rome for our evidence. We know that Paul whilst living in Rome encouraged people to fellowship in his house. *For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.(Acts 28:30,31NIV).* But as well as this Paul in an earlier letter to the Romans gives us insight into at least 3 other churches meeting in Rome. ³*Greet Priscilla^e and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. ⁴They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. ⁵Greet also the church that meets at their house.¹⁴Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them. ¹⁵Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them. (Acts 16:3-5,14&15NIV)* I am sure that these were just the tip of a very large iceberg.

Types of House Church

In this section I want to give some idea of the variety of HCs that it should be possible to find in a local church area. This is not meant to be an exclusive list in any way, as God's creative will is sure to bring together groupings that I could never imagine. Neither is it to be seen as a goal, "If we have all of these types of HC then we are a successful Local Church". What I want to outline here are simply some possibilities to whet your appetite.

I think that this is a good place to reiterate that a House Church is a complete expression of the local church, and should seek to serve their members as such. But in the same way that traditional churches often have a specific thrust, so cells within a wider local cell church group, will each have a specific flavour and approach, this is what I want to explore here. Some cells will start with one nature (normally evangelical) but as they grow will take of a new thrust (Perhaps healing), later as the folk receive from the Lord they may change again to show that maturity.

Evangelistic HCs

The most basic sort of HC is the evangelistic HC. In normal circumstances it should be seen as the basic model for all HCs (With the exception of the leaders meeting and possibly some of those clearly indicated as being only for believers). In the great commission we are all called to preach the Gospel (Matt. 28:19,20), equally the apostle Paul indicates that all should do the work of an evangelist (2Tim 4:5)

The first call in a House Church will almost certainly be an evangelistic HC. I would probably be unusual for there to be anything other than evangelistic HCs until the church had grown to 4 or 5 HCs in a local area. The Church is an organism, and organisms must grow, it is their nature. It is interesting to note that in all higher organisms, the cells in the original cell cluster are all the same; it is only later that the cells begin to specialize into different types. Almost any HC can be evangelistic in nature, (Children's, youth, social action etc.); there are no hard and fast rules. We don't rely on human structures, but the grace of God. He guides, He gives life and we submit to Him, allowing Him to form His will in us.

Leaders Groups

In the majority of situations the second type of group to form will be the leaders group. I have spoken about these groups in other places so will not go into depth here. But it is clear that as soon as you have more than one HC, the leaders will want to meet together. Leaders groups are not just for leaders, but also for wives, potential leaders and perhaps even sometimes for folk that need encouragement. It is important to note two things. Firstly, being invited to participate in a leaders group does not necessarily make you a leader, (Something that must clearly be understood by all, and reiterated from time to time). And, secondly, that the purpose of a leaders group is to give a "safe" environment, in which to be accountable to one another. Therefore it is important that no one should be introduced to the group who would work against that goal. Entrance to this group must be at the invitation of all the members.

Hospital or Healing Communities

So many folk come to us hurting that, I would expect to see this third sort of HC, emerge quite early in the life of the new network. It's purpose is to provide a safe healing environment

for those who are hurting, who have been damaged by their walk in the world and sometimes, it has to be said, as a result of their interactions with other Christians.

The leaders of this type of group would normally be skilled, experienced counsellors. Well able to offer care, prayer and understanding (along with necessary prods in to action) for those in their care. If there are no suitable counsellors in the church a senior elder could lead this group, or perhaps an older couple, who would be willing to learn, with the support of a senior elder.

These HCs must be seen as places where one spends a time of healing, and not as a permanent spiritual home. They should have a limited lifespan, allowing everyone to move on, and time for the leaders to recoup their strength before moving on to help others. If the leaders are not allowed this recouping time they very soon become tired and stale.

Sometimes in HCs like this you will find one dependant person who just won't let go. They suffer from the POM's (poor old me). They need to be gently led to accept and confess that POM is a sin and they should begin to take responsibility for their own lives, with the Lord's help and not rely on their counsellors /helpers. They definitely should not be allowed to continue in a healing cell for a long time, but encouraged to join a HC with a leader that will encourage them into independence.

If network size or situation allows, it may be a good idea to have specialist healing cells: Marriage, Children, and Abuse etc. One specialism that I would recommend for larger churches is a widows /widowers HC. Older folk, who have lost life long partners, need a positive environment in which to grieve. This has been vividly brought home to me recently, as I have seen my mother-in-law seeking to come to terms with the loss of her beloved husband of over 50 years. Jesus said that we should mourn with those who mourn, but I'm not at all sure that it's something we do well. This kind of HC is often well led by an older woman who has had time to come to terms with her loss and is now able to help others, although I know a very successful group like this near London that is run by a widowed, retired pastor.

The leaders of healing communities need to have time for their own healing and development as well. They should be encouraged to have some time off each year.

Children's HCs

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Matthew 19:14 (NIV)

In traditional churches the supposed needs of children are met in Sunday schools or in the more progressive churches some type of mid-week club, but is this the most biblical or socially correct way to meet their needs? Is there perhaps a better way? The Bible clearly teaches that it is the duty of Christian parents to teach and train their children and bring them up in the faith (Deut.6: 7). But what about other children? What about our children's friends? Living in Spain, we see some of the issues concerning children's ministry somewhat more sharply than in other places. Here in Spain evangelicals are often portrayed as a dangerous sect, therefore it is easy to imagine our difficulties. How would you feel if a dangerous sect invited your 10-year-old child to a meeting? Although in other countries there isn't the same problem, even in the States or England people are rightly suspicious of who is talking to their children. We therefore need to be very sensitive as to how we develop our ministry to children. Within the looser framework of a House church I feel that this can best be achieved through children's HCs.

Children of between 7 and 11 naturally form small groups, although we normally refer to them as gangs. This is how children naturally interact, how they first begin to build social structures. If therefore, we participate in this activity, children's HCs would be strong groupings

within the larger cell network, as the children would be functioning within structures that are self imposed and not externally imposed. Children's HCs would therefore be wholly owned by their members.

Gangs (children's HCs) are led by "Heroes", not by teachers, therefore the Sunday school class is not a helpful model for this type of group. It is imperative that we do not let ourselves become conformed to unhelpful patterns of the past. The main part of a child's spiritual training should be found (if possible) within the informality of his or her own family, so the school function is not the most important. Some churches, feeling that the main need is fellowship, form Christian children's clubs. Within traditional churches these clubs fulfil an important social role, but not always in the best way. Not all children function well in a larger group, the vast majority prefer a smaller more intimate group. The only place we find the necessary intimacy and informality is in the gang, or children's HC. As I develop this theme I hope that you will see that the gang is the also the best place for a child to begin to develop intimacy with God, In the gang a child will not feel embarrassed to use spiritual gifts.

I have already said that gangs are led by "heroes". As this is a most important concept we must look at this before going any further. Children need people to look up to. You may call them role models, mentors, or, as I do, heroes, but what is without any doubt, they are a necessary part of a child's growing up. Thinking of my own childhood I look back to various influential role models that were important to me. My Uncle Ernie, who was so strong and capable. Or Ron, a Baptist children's leader, who with his wife seemed to know God better than God knew himself. Then there was my friend Marlis, who was always ready to lead us into new adventures (like hunting rats under the local school hut). And especially my mum, who was the best cook in the world, and made me want to cook: and dad, who seemed to me to be a giant, who knew everything and could do anything. Who I am now is largely due to my contact with people like this.

So who are the heroes? Heroes can be of any age or sex. They tend to be older than the group and normally of the same sex, although this is far from a rule set in stone. They are like big brothers or sisters, favourite uncles or aunts or even adopted grandparents. I have seen groups like this work with teenage leaders, and older people. One of the most successful that I have seen was run by an older disabled woman. She always seemed to be surrounded by a cloud of 9 – 12 year old girls (with the occasional boy), like satellites orbiting her wheelchair. I well remember a Saturday I spent with her and a group of six to eight girls that we took sailing, We only had one small dingy, so my friend took the girls out two at a time whilst I stayed with the others on shore. As they were sailing around she kept looking at the clouds and told the girls of how Jesus calmed the storm. For the girls this was an enormous adventure, tinged with a little bit of fear that a storm might come, but at the same time learning to trust in God.

As we can see from the story above, heroes teach by example, modeling good behavior and beliefs. Because my friend trusted God, the girls did too. It is fundamental to all leadership within cell churches, that we teach by example. Like Paul, we should be able to say, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ". 1 Corinthians 11:1 (NIV). This doesn't mean that we have to be perfect. They will learn from our mistakes too if we are brave enough to admit them. But it does mean that we must be headed in the right direction.

The final point I want to make about heroes is that they lead into adventure. I am using the term adventure here in a very broad sense. It can either be active adventure, that is adventurous activities (swimming, camping, sailing etc.) or passive adventure (reading, cooking, theatre and dance). The important thing is that the one who opens the door to this adventure is the hero. Let me give you two examples. One children's group that I know has about 10 members, both girls and boys. The hero is a fisherman, who, when he was younger was a lifeboat man. He leads them in camping and sailing adventures (once or twice a year), but this leads to all sorts of other activities, such as, swimming, map-reading, missionary concern

through missions to seamen and the like, first aid, prayer for sailors, climbing, Bible studies on responsibility and laying down your life for others, and a myriad of other activities. But mostly the children are learning to be as Christ-like as their hero. Another group, led by a young housewife, has mostly girls. They love contemporary dance. The leader, through her enthusiasm, has opened doors for them to dance in major events in various parts of the country. But they have also learned discipline, keep-fit, costume making, music, Biblical worship, simple evangelism techniques, etc. Most of this they learn by copying the life of this young housewife and her husband.

From what I have said it must be clear by now that to start a children's HC you must become a hero. To do that you should first try to put yourself in the shoes of your target group. What do they like? What do they want to do? Do you do things in your life that for them would be an adventure? Invite children to join in your adventure. One friend of mine invites his son's friends round to "help him" do mechanical jobs on the car. Do not take children swimming (as an authority figure), but go swimming and play with them as their hero. Hero status is also confirmed by such normal adult activities as driving, earning and being able to take children where they couldn't go alone. Open doors for your group!

High adventure does not need to be daily, but should be evenly spaced say every six months. (I remember an independent children's work in Wembley, North London, whilst I was planting the church there. They met twice a week, for games, chats, arts and crafts and an epilogue. And twice a year they all went to Chichester harbour for sailing weekends).

As the group grows, sensitively divide it, introducing sub-heroes. This is a little like the idea of "sixers" and "Patrol Leaders" in the Scout movement, although I would not be altogether comfortable with the incorporation of some of the aspects of this movement today. These sub-heroes are experienced older children, 13+, who can inspire the youngsters. The resulting group of groups will naturally become the Children's Congregation (Kids' Church) of the evolving House Church Network.

As the Children's cells mature, they naturally turn into youth HCs (see the next section for more information about this).

Regardless of age, the leaders relate together in the normal leaders' cells, at the level of celebrations. This does of course mean that they must be mature enough to do this. If the network has a lot of children's HCs, you could consider having a children's leaders group.

Thinking about money matters, no child should be excluded for lack of money. I have seen some groups come tumbling down when there is one child from a poorer family who could not participate in the activities. Each child should be encouraged to tithe, giving at least 10% of their pocket money into the group. Activities should be paid for by the children themselves (swimming, trips, concerts etc.) Their parents will normally be happy to contribute.

Major activities should include hanging out, Non-organised games, Food Things, Adventures (Camping, swimming, boats etc) and Church (Congregation). Church is part of what our Gang does. Every activity day should include natural opportunities for prayer and bible studies.

Some leaders feel threatened if their groups meet without them. We must try to overcome this. It is positive if the groups meet without their hero's, although the heroes house should be the natural place for them to "hang out". They must understand the hero's need for privacy and family time. Group members should be encouraged to spend time with their family, as well as with the group. The group is not normally meant to be a surrogate family.

Observations on youth HCs

I do not regard myself, in any way an expert on youth work, and therefore hesitate to make bold statements. The following observations come from watching tried and tested youth ministries, and applying their work to the house church model.

It is perhaps easier to say what youth HCs aren't, than what they are. They are not a youth club or group, in the traditional sense, both of which are provided by "adults" to "entertain" youth. Neither are youth HCs a means of giving the youth something to occupy them. What, then is a youth HC? Youth HCs are radical, life-changing relational groups, where young people can safely learn to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As I work in Spain, it is quite natural for me to see youth HCs in terms of "Pandillas". These are small mixed groups of between 5 and 20 young people. Although within an individual "pandilla" most would be of about the same age, young people who associate in "pandillas" range from 8 or 9, to 25 or even 30. In Spain these groups are ubiquitous; every young person has his or her "pandilla" of close friends and relations (cousins). They are not so common in other parts of Europe, but there is no reason why not.

These groups should be flexible and open. Although the members of the HC should be well defined, visitors from outside or from other cells should be made to feel "at home". Receiving visitors and visiting other groups allow the members to get to know others and begin relationships in a safe environment, without diminishing their commitment to their group. Group leaders must be careful to refer those with problems to their HC leaders.

At first youth HCs will feed into the main congregational meetings, but later, when there are 3 or 4 youth cells, it may be appropriate to have a separate youth congregation.

The content of the meetings should be more or less the same as other HCs, with perhaps a slant more appropriate to youth. Generally young people prefer a more participatory style of worship. Full use should be made of new technologies. Great emphasis should be placed on "hanging out", that is, just being together.

Young people in general have a much more radical outlook on life than older folk. A wise youth cell leader would harness this enthusiasm to do the work of the church in evangelism and social action. As a young Christian I was a member of a youth HC which put special emphasis on evangelism. It is heartening to see that many from that original group are still actively involved in evangelism some 25-30 years later.

It is at this age that people begin to form relationships with members of the opposite sex, with the longer-term view of marriage. Youth cells are not places to "pair off" as is often the case in traditional youth groups, but places to grow together, without the stresses brought about by immature relationships. When folk find partners, they should be encouraged to continue within the group, and not to separate themselves. This leads to their having a more balanced view of their relationship, and avoids the temptations that often lead to sin. Almost every young couple that I have had to counsel about immorality have previously separated themselves from other relationships.

The best youth cell leaders that I have seen have all been young married couples, who understand, and still live within, youth culture.

Communities

Many Christians are once again feeling the call to live together in community, sharing all things in common. It is possible to have communities within a house church network, with each community house making up one HC. This is more or less how some of the larger Christian communities like Jesus Army function.

I don't want to go deeply into communities, as that is not the purpose of this work. What it is important to say is that a community should have no special position within the church, it's just another sort of HC.

Prophetic / Intercessory HC

Given that the local church network was sufficiently large, one or more prophetic/intercessory HCs could be formed.

Bringing together the intercessors and those who prophecy is a good move for any church. It provides a resource of guidance and blessing for the leaders, it provides blessing too for the intercessors and "prophets" and provides a forum for testing prophetic words, received by the church (1 Cor. 14:29-33).

In order to stop "self-proclaimed prophets" from causing problems in the church, membership should be by invitation only. However it should be understood by everyone that just because someone is a member of this cell, that this does not make them a prophet, nor does it give them authority over anyone.

There seems to be a great confusion in the church over the difference between a prophet, one who serves in the gift ministry of Prophet (Eph. 2:20; 4:7-13), and one who prophesies (a position to which we should all aspire (1Cor. 12:28-31; 14:31 & 14:39)). Some people also try to make a distinction between Old Testament and New Testament prophets, declaring that the rule of grace mean that New Testament prophets do not need to have 100% accuracy (Deut. 18:21-22), this is clearly wrong.

Social Action HC

Some feel led to Churches that have a clear social action thrust. I know of groups within churches that have started soup kitchens, after school clubs, refuges for battered wives and much much more. If a cell feels led to enter into social action, first they should be encouraged to collaborate with other groups (taking the church into the community), then they should draw up a plan, seek finance, and perhaps set up a trust to guide the work. If it is something smaller, the cell should be encouraged to "get on with it".

One small HC (within a much larger network), that I know of, took a welcome pack to every new family moving into their town. It comprised of a homemade cake (made by a member of the group), a new testament and a "Welcome to _____" booklet, giving information about the town, services, bus timetables etc. as well as information about the church. It also included a personalized invitation to a Supper from a member of the HC. All of this was funded by small advertisements in the booklet, paid for by local businesses. This is positive social action, of real help to newcomers in the community.

Missionary HCs

In recent years the nature of missions has changed a lot; there are fewer full time career missionaries, short-term missions are on the increase (Often very short-term, two-weeks to a month). Also on the increase are non-traditional "tent making" missionaries. Therefore many would feel attracted to a cell with a missionary emphasis.

This group should contain not only people interested in missions support, but also those interested in short term missions from the church and actual church missionaries, when they are visiting. The emphasis should primarily be on the mission field and the support (not just financial) of the folk there. Members of the group should communicate as much as possible with those in the field, so that prayers can always be fresh. Communication should be imaginative, using many different methods; Letters, Parcels with specialties from home (we'd die for a pork

pie, and as for kippers.....), telephone, E.Mail, teleconferences, videos etc. One church I know in the United States, send their missionaries a banner every year. You might think, well what's the use of that? But I can't begin to tell you how loved it makes those missionaries feel, as they know that folk in the US are spending hours, pouring their love into this work of art, for their missionaries. The natives to whom these missionaries minister are also blessed, as each year the couple present the previous years banner to a local church. This is truly creative communication. Sometimes I wish that someone would just take time to video a whole Sunday Service, with greetings and coffee included, just so that I could join in a service with folk that I know and love. (It's interesting to note that thousands have read the first edition of this book and I have yet to receive a video like this). Creative communication is all that it needs. A missionary cell could also help with one of the missionary's most difficult tasks, the missionary news and prayer letter. Many missionaries spend up to 20% of their time working on these necessary means of communications, but in doing so are being diverted from their principal ministry. Given good communication between the HC and the missionary, the HC could take this task from the missionaries shoulders thus freeing them for ministry, the personal touch would not be lost, as the missionary would continue to write personally to those who wrote to him. This is how the church builds itself up in love.

Many feel that a home church that is so focused, cannot fulfill the goal of fully expressing the local church, but that is just not so. I know a church in South East London, whose main thrust for many years, was missions. So much so that they became well known all over Africa and later in Eastern Europe. Even in Spain people have spoken to me about the missionary zeal of that church. Yet all the while that mission was centre stage in that church, the Lord blessed it. The church still has mission high on its agenda, although is now more balanced in its approach. You can be a one-theme church and still grow in the Lord.

Study

A study HC is perhaps the most difficult to run. Here we are not talking about just Bible study, all cells should do that. No, here we are talking about a cell for those who for whatever reason want more, perhaps to prepare for ministry or to grow in knowledge of the Word. At 45 and having recently completed my doctoral thesis, I am still "studying to show myself approved." I am so in love with the Word that I continually want to know more.

The group should be a mixture of folk, with no defined students or teachers, but all learning from one another. It shouldn't just study the Bible, but also current events and controversies in the light of the Bible. On the day that I am writing this, an ex head of state has been put on trial for crimes against humanity, and I feel impelled to deepen my knowledge of what the bible has to say about the accountability of both national and local leaders.

The group should seek to share their discoveries with the whole church, thus helping all to grow in the love and knowledge of the Lord.

I would particularly recommend the Alpha-Omega Bible College, promoted by Outreach Fellowship International. See www.robertfitts.com.

Arts, Media and Worship HC

In a larger local network one or more of these HCs would be a blessing. Often springing from prophetic HCs these groups provide a great home for those with artistic giftings, who are often misunderstood by those who do not share their gifts. Their work may be seen by some as being a bit "fringe". We have a friend who is studying "Drama Therapy", and the response of many is to see that as weird, rather than as a good means to help folk in need. I remember another congregation where we ministered, where we really came into blessing when we

stopped thinking and talking about "Mary" being "an exhibitionist prancing around at the back" and welcomed her to share her gift at the front. In no time at all we had a small group who were able to express in dance, the worship that we all felt but couldn't show in that way.

God seems to use the arts to speak to the church in a prophetic way, to speak to the church. A good example of this is that the Lord will often stimulate me to produce a computer graphic to use during worship in church, this in turn may give insight to the worship leaders about where God is leading the meeting. It's only in the intimacy of a cell that enough trust can grow to enable this to happen.

To sum up, an arts and media HC will form a solid base for those who will go on to bless the wider church.

Common Interest HCs

Many Evangelistic HCs start because people who share a common interest, come together and in sharing their interest, bring others to know Christ. The common theme may be many and varied; I have already mentioned a Christian hiking club that became a home church, but they could also be PTA's, Handicraft groups, Camping Clubs, or almost anything else that you can think of. Near the town where I was born, there was an active Christian Model Engineering Club. They made working model steam engines that ran on a small track that they had behind the hut where they met. Every evening and Sunday afternoons, when they met together, they included a time of prayer and Bible study. The spiritual aspect of their club was important to them, although they did not neglect their passion for steam engines. Soon others who were interested only in the trains wanted to join and were allowed a "visiting membership", many of these too became committed Christians, although some fell away through lack of interest in the spiritual side of the club. Although I'm sure that the club would not have regarded itself as a home church, which is effectively what it was. The members soon found that it was in the club that they found fellowship, love, and a shared growing together in Christ, and not in the local churches that they attended. It is significant to me, that when a home church was planted in their area, the majority of club members joined with their wives and children.

Work-place HCs

One of the ideas coming from "Alpha" that I most like is, "Work place Alpha", that is "Alpha" cells in the office, shop or factory, where you work. To my mind this should naturally lead to work-place HCs, rather than tearing new Christians from a comfortable small meeting in their place of business, and thrusting them into the un-natural setting of a big church building on a Sunday morning.

Many large companies already have Christian Groups of some kind, but what I am suggesting goes somewhat further, with a HC in most medium sized companies, each one plugged into the local church network. Christians would then be able to support one another more fully, in the same way that Ananias, Safira and Paul supported each other in their tent making business, and Lydia (a business woman) who had a church in her house. Each Christian could then meet in their HC once or twice a week, share with them here and there during the week and attend congregational and celebrational meetings at weekends, thus coming close to the new testament norm of meeting daily.

The role of Apostles and Prophets in a House Church Network

.....built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,..... (Eph 2:20a)

When we talk of the Church being founded on the apostles and prophets, we should first understand that the church is founded on the teachings that we find in the Bible, and not on traditions or man's ideas. The ancient apostles and prophet have set forth for us the word of God in a way that is definitive and can never be repeated. The bible is a complete revelation that cannot be added to or subtracted from (Rev. 22:18 & 19). Accepting this we can see that every Bible believing church is built upon the apostles and prophets. Does this mean that there is no place for apostles and prophets today? In no way! Rom.11:29 "... God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." He gave these ministries as gifts to the church; He won't take his gift back now.

In this short text I'd like to share a little about the role of Apostles and prophets within the HC Networks. I also want to go on to look at how we recognise these ministries and how, if someone feels called to be an apostle or prophet their call can be tested, allowing them to arrive at the place where they can best serve the Lord.

The role of Apostles and prophets are quite clear from scripture, Apostles are God's master builders, their main role is church planting and development, and according to the pattern that God has given in His Word. Prophets on the other hand bring God's wisdom and guidance to bear on particular situations. In a wider sense, they together with apostles and evangelists confront the world with God's Word and justice. Putting it simply apostles and prophets apply god's plans to the church, planting new churches and developing existing ones. They should be in clear and open relationships with other gift ministries, ready at all times to listen to them, and share with them, although not necessarily submitting to them in everything. An example of this can be seen in Acts 21 when the prophet Agabus bought a word about Paul's impending imprisonment. Paul was not swayed by Agabus' arguments and went ahead with his journey knowing that imprisonment lay ahead.

Another point to be made from Agabus' story is that God's standards haven't changed. Prophets still have to have a 100% record. Some have tried to teach in recent years that a 100% record isn't necessary, just as long as they are right most of the time. I feel that this line does not accord with scripture, and is only taught to justify the errors of those who are in reality not prophets. I think that this arises because people confuse the ability to prophesy (that is, receive a word from the Lord), and the ministry of a prophet, who as well as transmitting god's word, are also agents of His word, power and justice in the World, as well as providing a strong foundation for the church.

How then can we recognise the gifts of apostles and prophets? Well, the first method is the easiest. It is summed up in the quote, "If it looks like a duck, sounds like a duck, smells like a duck and eventually tastes like a duck, then it is probably a duck." If someone is constantly doing something well, then in all probability they are fulfilling their ministry. So when we see a ministry building up strong churches (numbers aren't as important as maturity and strength), then it is very probable that that person is an apostle. Equally, when a prophetic ministry is shown to have 100% reliability over a period and builds up the church of God, then in all probability that person is a prophet.

The second test for me is maturity. God very rarely sends new Christians into these ministries, although I have seen some new Christians who tell me that they are called to be apostles and prophets, they are often misguided, deceived or deluded, yet some demonstrate a real calling and the beginnings of a gifting. I would call these proto-apostles and proto-prophets, being the stage before moving into the full gifting. I feel it ludicrous for a person to call

themselves apostle or prophet before they have some track record. This however doesn't mean that we should dismiss ministry from young Christians. God chooses whom He chooses.

A third test is that of stability. Does the person consistently move on in what the Lord has given them, or are they constantly chopping and changing, caught up with every new whim or spiritual fashion. Apostles and prophets, whilst constantly open to a new breeze of the Holy Spirit and not open to every wind of doctrine. They are marked out by their constancy and stability. They "keep on keeping on" to the point of pig-headedness. For another more subjective sign, we should not rule out the witness of God in our spirit.

Some say that all true apostles should have had an encounter with the risen Christ, as Paul did in Acts 9. I find it hard to take a position on this. Personally I have had an encounter with Jesus, when he called me into the ministry. Other I know haven't had that type of experience. Did Apollos have an encounter with the risen Lord? If so why did he have to be corrected by Aquilla and Priscilla?

The final test is collegiality, Is the body of the church agreed about their call? Do fellow apostles and prophets accept them?

We should note the actions of the church in Antioch. Acts 13:1-3. "In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off." They were already aware of ministries at work in their midst, but then during a time of prayer and fasting, the Lord said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

First Paul and silas had been seen as constant mature Christians ministering in their own community, then during a time of prayer and fasting the Lord confirmed their particular calling, separating them to be gifts to the whole Church.

So, if you feel called to one of these ministries (or any other come to that), how can you test you calling and go on to begin ministering in the church.

1. Submit yourself to your local church. God normally calls and commissions people in the context of their local church. Unfortunately more than 50% fall at this first obstacle. They feel a call and think that they are instantly more important than their church or its leaders. Their pride distances them from the Body, and eventually from any possibility of serving the Lord. So submit yourself to your church and leadership, God will bless you through it. Some will say, "But my pastor doesn't understand. He doesn't let me minister." If that's what's in your heart, let me ask you; when did you begin to think like that? If it was before you were called, why didn't you go to another church then? If it was since your call, perhaps your leaders know something that you don't. Your submission will speak to them of your worth, rebellion only shows unsuitability for greater responsibility.
2. Look for opportunities to support the ministries of apostles and prophets that you know. Go to their meetings, offer to help put out the chairs, act as stewards etc.
3. If possible enter into a discipling or mentoring relationship with someone already exercising your ministry. Learn from them. As they see you grow they will often open opportunities for you.
4. As you humbly minister what God has given you, little by little, folk will begin to recognise your ministry, and ask you for help.
5. Ministries are not offices in the Church. The only authority that you will ever have is that of Christ at work in you, and many times this will be only to the measure that others see it. Don't get above yourself!

6. Relate to other ministries in accountability groups. You MUST have others who will feel free to correct you if necessary. Without this you risk becoming a little pope. KEEP HUMBLE!

I hope that this small outline has helped you think about this important subject. I would like to close with just one last thought. **Apostles and prophets are humble servants of God and his church.** Those who demand position, rights, and authority demonstrate a different spirit. One which needs to be broken before it can become useful to God.

Authority

This chapter was originally a sermon that I shared with leaders first in Spain and then in the UK. Later sending copies to large number of leading ministries worldwide. It was well accepted everywhere, and is included here as it has a lot to say to the house church movement in general at this time.

One of the things that I am seeing in this present move of the Holy Spirit is that God is raising up new "apostolic" leaders, men full of grace and power in the Holy Spirit. These men are not only blessing their own communities, but in different degrees their influence is spreading wider.

At the same time, others are trying to copy the influence and authority of these new leaders, in their own strength, without the character of those being raised up by the Lord.

I began to study and pray in this area after a specific word to our own church in Spain. God said that we needed new wineskins. I saw immediately the need for a new understanding of leadership and structure, without departing from scriptural principles, but separating ourselves from human traditions of the past.

We need new wineskins, but they must be real wineskins; made with the same materials, and in the same way. Our wineskins must be made from the right materials. You can't make wineskins from paper, or cheese. No you need the very best animal skins. Skins always speak to us of sacrifice. So, what is the material that we need to make these new wineskins? Sacrificial leaders, giving themselves up for the sheep.

Matthew 20:25-28 (NIV) 25Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—28just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

As well as being made of the right materials, our wineskins must be made in the right way. Sewing up a wineskin the wrong way would be a disaster, you'd end up with a handbag that wouldn't hold any wine at all. No you need the right structure. As I will go on to show the pattern that we have from the primitive apostolic church is a leadership structure of two or more elders, assisted by two or more deacons.

A short history lesson

We are not meant to be revolutionary, seeking to do away with the status quo. No, instead we are called to be radical, that is, going back to our roots.

In the Bible we find two different kinds of ministry described: There are **"those who serve"** and **"those who speak the word"**. The first group of ministers, "those who serve", are the office bearers, elders and deacons, chosen for their character and stability. We read that they (1 Timothy 3:2-13 (NIV)) *2...must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. 5(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil. 7He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.*

8Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. 9They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. 10They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

11 In the same way, their wives

are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

12 A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. 13 Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Their authority comes from God as a result of their office, it is different from the authority of the other group "those who speak the word", whose authority flows from a grace filled character. These "speakers of the word" are the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers -- ministries whose lives are grace gifts from the Holy Spirit to the church. Their authority is based solely on their submission to Jesus Christ and their relationship with other leaders.

So, at the end of the New Testament period, every Christian community was led by a group of elders, helped by assistants, known as deacons. They were rarely full-time, continuing in their everyday jobs as long as possible. The elders had no president, leader or permanent chairman. All were equal. There was a two-fold and not a threefold ministry.

It was not until the third century that this two-fold ministry gave place to a three-fold ministry, putting one man at the head of each community, known as a pastor or bishop. This three-tier leadership, with a pastor leading a group of elders and deacons, continued to lead independent, self governing churches, who had good fraternal relations with other churches. The Pastor, although seen as different from the elders, led them as a "first among equals". The role of the pastor or senior elder was defined by the Church Father Ignatius as: administering the church finance, being chairman of the elders, calling church meetings and, with the other elders, administering the sacraments. It is doubtful whether he could discipline believers, even with the agreement of the other elders, this needing the authority of the church meeting. The church meeting would also appoint leaders and delegates to other churches.

So why did the two-fold churches of the New Testament period become three-fold churches? First, churches needed to be represented in councils, and it is always easier to have one known delegate. The second reason was growing professionalism in the ministry; the full-timer in the end became the "authority" who did everything. Another reason was the fear of false doctrines. Every church wanted to have their authority of right and wrong. The final reason mentioned in some early texts was their wish to be like other religions. Not exactly the best reason in the world! Personally I believe that three tier ministry goes against the doctrines of the Apostles.

What about today?

This three-fold leadership is similar to the structure that we see in many churches today. Unfortunately the role of Pastor has become strengthened, and the collegiality of the primitive church really seems to have been lost.

In the Bible, all ministers were to exercise oversight and admonition.

1 Thessalonians 5:12 (NIV) 12 Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.

2 Timothy 4:2 (NIV) 2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

What do these words mean? "Admonish" means to give advice, correcting and encouraging to good actions. "Rebuke" means that we are to warn people when they are in the wrong. "To oversee" implies the sort of supervision that counsellors give, allowing a person to be accountable. I don't find the idea that leaders are to control the lives of believers anywhere in the New Testament, rather that we should warn, encourage and instruct the saints, helping them to become personally responsible to God, and thus to deepen their relationships with Him.

So what about the obedience texts?

Hebrews 13:17 (NIV) 17Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

It is true we should obey our leaders, but is this to be a blind obedience or flowing from our relationship in Christ? One youth leader wrote recently, "The overwhelming law of relationships in God's Kingdom is LOVE – meaning obedience BY CHOICE. This is why Paul stated that God has not given us a spirit of slavery taking us into fear again, but rather the spirit of adoption. All true leadership in the kingdom must have the impetus of Jesus' love for the Father, not grasping for significance or security through reputation, power or money as [some] do. A true leader leads with authority, but that authority, if it is true authority, comes from the Father for the purpose and increase of love. Love for the Father, and love for the people that the Father loves."

Some have pointed to the story of the healing of the centurion's servant, as proving that we all need to have a "covering". First let me say the only lesson that Jesus draws is that of faith. But I do agree we have to be responsible. As church members we are responsible both to God and to the elders that the Lord has placed over us, in turn the leaders are not only responsible to God and each other, but also to the church as a whole. This is why the two-fold collegiate model of the church, that existed in New Testament times, is preferable, as it avoids at all times one man "lording it" over another. If your church structure is three-fold, there is nothing to stop the pastor humbling himself and working alongside his fellow elders as equals. In the past I have always found that neither the church nor I have ever lost out, when I have chosen to taken a humble path.

What about the gift ministries?

The ministries that I am seeing raised up by God today clearly fall under the heading of Charismatic leaders. By this I don't mean to use the word "charismatic" in its common form, meaning "attractive", but in its original form, meaning, "gifted". I have described these men as being full of grace and power in the Holy Spirit, not only blessing their own communities, but in different degrees blessing others as well. They express their authority not by demanding obedience, but by humbly sharing the message that Christ has put in their hearts.

Putting them into their historical context Rev. Dr. Tom Rees wrote, "Charismatic leaders were not necessarily office bearers in any one Christian community (although they could be); They were not elected or appointed to any office; they were not set apart for duties by any ecclesiastical ceremony. The "word" came to them and they were compelled by the inward impulsion of the Holy Spirit to speak the message given to them to deliver. Some were itinerant, whilst others confined themselves to their own community. They were responsible to no ecclesiastical authority. Churches were encouraged to test them and their message; for the gift of discerning whether a so-called prophet spoke a truly divine message was always presupposed to be within the local church. Once accepted, the Didache teaches that they took their place with the leaders; they could preside at the Lord's Supper and their judgement in cases of discipline could sometimes overbear ordinary church rules."

It is clear that their authority comes from God's word flowing from the Spirit of Christ at work within these men. All truth inheres in Him and issues from Him. I also note the words of Paul to the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 10:8 (NIV) 8For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it.

I see men like this being raised up in many places. Some have become internationally-known figures; others are working away in one town. Their mark is humility; one of the internationally known speakers continually encourages others to join him in the task, without ever trying to rule over another. When asked to form an association of churches, he humbly put another to co-ordinate it, refusing the role of leader. Another leader like this that I know, humbly continues to work in his job as a computer programmer, whilst at the same time ministering into the lives of many leaders in his area. Some are pastors of ordinary churches and some are people like you. But every one of them is full of the grace and power of God, ready to lead the Church in the blessing that lies ahead, not like shepherds who walk behind their sheep, hitting them and allowing their dogs to nip their heels if they become a bit stubborn, but like eastern shepherds boldly stepping out ahead knowing that the sheep will follow. They trust the Chief Shepherd who said, *Juan 10:27 (The Message) My sheep recognise my voice. I know them, and they follow me.*

The others

At the beginning I spoke about another group of people; leaders who, although often well meaning, misunderstand the nature of the gifting and authority enjoyed by the charismatic leaders. They, out of jealousy or ambition, seek to attain a high degree of authority, often leading them into abuses and error. Some are beginning to teach that the gift ministries are in fact offices, making themselves somewhat akin to an evangelical pope.

The problem is, sinful men like to be told what to do, what to believe etc. it relieves them of the responsibility for their actions. Folk have been doing it since the very beginning of time: Adam said, "I wasn't my fault, it was the woman that you gave me". Eve in turn blamed the serpent.

God describes this type of situation in *Jeremiah 5:30 -31 (NIV) 30"A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: 31The prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their*

own authority, and my people love it this way. But what will you do in the end?

Authoritarian Leaders and churches survive because men always seek others to take responsibility for them, instead of taking responsibility for themselves.

Authoritarian leaders are abusive. Marc Dupont, one of the new leaders that God is raising up, spoke about this in his book, "Walking out of spiritual abuse". "One of the common traits of an abusive Christian leader is the use of manipulation to get something from the church or audience. Visionary messages are preached about everyone becoming involved and contributing, while liberally condemning those who would hesitate. Pleas for financial support are often underscored with manipulation that if one doesn't give the ministry will collapse. It is interesting how often those who make such statements are often great teachers about faith in God's provision. This is not to say that church leaders should not make the needs known to the congregation. But that can be done matter-of-factly, trusting God to speak to the people, rather than by using fear or guilt.

A youth leader in the U.K. writing about abusive leaders gave the following five "signs" of an abusive church:

- 1 One person is in charge and expects to be obeyed.
- 2 Leaders react strongly at being questioned or contradicted.
- 3 Leaders expect agreement without having to prove their point.
- 4 People are afraid to make disagreements known.
- 5 People are afraid to share their different opinions for fear of being put down.

I believe that this controlling spirit has its roots in the inadequacy of the leader. Insecure in his relationship with God and man, the abusive leader will seek to manipulate situations to his own advantage. He can't believe that God's plans and ideas can be worked out in a way that is best for him. Marc Dupont writes, "When a person with bondages such as rejection, fear, envy, greed, or lust comes into power and prestige, that person can often be manipulate by their hurts and chains. Unless there is a strong foundation of personal trust in God's goodness and protection, there is usually an attempt to cover up the weakness. We tend, like Adam and Eve did, to compensate for inward fear and insecurity, with control and manipulation. Jesus said in John 14:30, that Satan had no hold within Him with which to manipulate Him.

Many of the churches led by these authoritarian leaders are at this time coming to a point of crisis. Without thinking hard, I can think of several, here in Spain, in the U.K. and in other parts of the world, that are in crisis. Some have split, others are on the point of splitting. Some have suffocated and died, whilst others are seeing numbers and giving dwindle. But the good news is that it's not necessarily too late!

Conclusion

To the new leaders among you: Keep humble, look to Jesus, He's coming soon.

To the elders and deacons among you: Keep humble, look to Jesus, He's coming soon. Don't ever try to lord it over your sheep, lead them with humility. God will hold you accountable.

To the sheep among you: Keep humble, look to Jesus, He's coming soon.

And to all of you I want to say this: God doesn't care how big your church or reputation is or how successful you are. HE LOVES YOU UNCONDITIONALLY, REGARDLESS OF YOUR SUCCESS OR FAILURE. UNDERSTANDING THIS WILL LEAD US TO FREEDOM.

House Churches, or churches with cells – a question of Leadership

Over and over, I have written about HCs stressing that each HC should be in itself a complete expression of the local church. This is aim each church in a home, building together with others the congregation and celebrations of the whole local church. This is markedly different to a church with cell or house groups. Churches of this sort are hierarchical and inflexible at the base, people are lost among the house groups and are never really picked up. I have been a leader in this type of church and was pained that only about 50% attended mid-week home group meetings. Many folk never had the help that they needed from the body, preferring to go to "professional" ministers, also some potential leaders were never given room to develop. Eventually they went elsewhere, another loss to the church, preventing its growth.

In House churches this never happens, as the church is the small group! Thus there is almost 100% attendance, with very high percentages attending congregational and celebration meetings too. Some may try to join at the congregational level, thus bypassing the HC, but these people must be firmly encouraged to see that the church is in the HC and the only way to participate (giving or receiving) in the church is at HC level. In the HC someone in need will be easily spotted, and effectively helped by their peers (body ministry), only being referred to others if their need is outside the competence of the group.

As a church is constantly growing and changing, there is also a continuing need for leaders, meaning that few will find the need to look elsewhere.

HCs = Life
Home Groups = Dead weight

I would invite any church that has house groups, to have a carefully and honest look at them. In general, the very best only attract 50-60% of church members. Often there is some confusion over their role, in many places they are seen as a better place for pastoral care and Bible study, but the home group leaders are rarely given the necessary authority and training. If a leader is expected to be a pastor, he needs the authority to pastor, if he is expected to lead a Bible study, he needs some training. On the other hand, a House church leader HAS authority to care for those in his HC and the truly humble leader will explore the Bible WITH his group. He would not teach, unless of course that was his ministry. The church has become too professional. By this I do not mean that we should not try to be as professional as possible, simply that we don't have to be a Peter or Paul before we can lead a Church. Each of us have different callings in the Lord. Some of us are called to be apostles, others prophets and so on, but everyone has a part to play. Unfortunately the history of the Church (even recent history) has pushed people into moulds that are totally unbiblical. I well remember talking to a "pastor" from a major Pentecostal denomination. His grouping accepted the ministry of pastor, deacon and elder, and possibly evangelist as well. This brother faithfully tried to pastor a church for over twenty years, within his grouping he became known as a "difficult character", always pushing for bold central moves within the organization. Yet outside his denomination he was highly respected, being sought out by many leaders in his area for advice and counsel. When I met him, he had just taken the bold step of laying down his pastorate to become a "consultant". When I asked him about his work as a consultant, he perfectly described to me the role and ministry of an apostle, when I told him this, his response was most instructive. "Yes Keith, I know I'm called to be an apostle, The Lord showed me that over twenty years ago. But my denomination doesn't have apostles, so I became a pastor, something that I've been doing all that time, with some success. However people kept coming to me for help in new church situations or in developing their churches. I soon realized that I was spending over half my time in apostolic work. But, my denomination doesn't accept apostles, so I called myself a "consultant". Whilst it is true that what this man calls himself isn't important, he had conformed

himself to a ministry that his denomination had required of him for over 20 year, even when he began to minister what God had put in his heart, he still fought shy of the word apostle, preferring instead to call himself "consultant". I thank God for this humble man, but feel sorry for a denomination that has crushed 20 years of potential ministry from this mans life, just because they don't think apostles are for today. I thank God that He is unchanging and He thinks that we need apostles today.

Unfortunately, because the church has a history of pushing square pegs into round holes, sometimes the reverse happens and people hardly notice until it is too late. People who are round pegs try to push themselves into some very square hole. It's like the old song, "Anything you can do I can do better....", these people feel that they can only make a contribution if they have what they consider an "important" role, as prophet or apostle. This is mostly because they do not understand the nature of authority and don't want to be submitted to another, Mark 9:34 "But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." or perhaps because they want to "lord it" over others. I've seen three cases recently. One of them is a capable evangelist, who suddenly got it into his head that he was THE END-TIME PROPHET. His weird, negative "prophecies", first cased him to be disciplined by his church and later led to his divorce and mental treatment. The second is a pastor who says he is an apostle. His bold "apostolic statements" have led to a split in his church. Needless to say nobody apart from himself recognises his apostolic call. The third is an evangelist, who is trying to be a pastor. He leads people to the Lord, but they never stay. His "church" grows to about 15 or so before collapsing to 3 or 4, over and over in cycles during the past 15 years. In his frustration he has neglected his wife and children, leading to their needing long-term counselling support. Yet still he is fixed on his call that nobody sees but himself.

What is the answer to all of this chaos? I believe it to be quite simple. Those who feel themselves called to ministry must humble themselves and work in their cell, until through their work they receive the recognition of the church and society. Paul said in 1Cor.9:1&2. "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord." This shows that his authority flowed from the relationship he had built with his brothers and sisters. A person who demands authority, simply shows that he doesn't have it. After all, authority comes from the Lord, not a job title.

In closing this section I want to share my understanding of authority within a house church. The only "offices", giving authority by their very nature, which I find in the New Testament, are those of Elder and Deacon. Peter and Paul, both teach that we should obey these ministers, however the words they use indicate that these authorities would try to persuade and convince, rather than demand blind obedience. You may well ask, what about apostles, prophets etc? I believe that apostolic authority has it's base in the Lord and in Him alone. I have never hidden my apostolic call, let me explain how this works out for me:

As a Christian, a member of a local church, I submit myself to all spiritual authority. Rather than being an authority, I submit myself to authority. Well, you may tell me, you're married, you have authority over your wife. You're right, the Bible teaches that my wife has to be subject to me, but it goes on to say that I must love her and give myself for her,(Eph.5:25). For me, this means that I must always put her interests before mine, always thinking of her first, my needs and wishes become secondary to hers. OK I hear you say, what about your children? They are under your authority. Once again, this is true, but, my wife and I have modelled the love of Christ to our children for over twenty years, now I give them freedom to develop that love in the world, neither of them live with us now, I don't feel that I should expect them to obey me in the same way. You may think that my role in the local church here gives

me a certain authority. This is true as well, but I would rather persuade the folk here with love, than have them obey me as puppets. Some would point to my role in various international organizations, and the authority I have there, but I would say that my role is to serve, not to direct. Finally there are those who would point to the call that the Lord has placed on my life as an apostle. I have to reply, there is an authority, but I chose to lay it before the throne. Like the elders in heaven, all we can do is cast our crowns before he who is King of kings and Lord of lords. I have died to myself, the dead have no authority. However Jesus is alive in me, with Paul I can say, it's no longer I that live, but Christ who lives through me. When He moves in my heart I will speak the words that He gives me, and they will carry His authority and not mine. I minister in His authority, and not my own and therefore I can never put myself over another, I too, am with them, bowing before His throne.

House-Churches as Healing Communities

Many respected friends and colleagues have shown an interest in the resurgence of “Healing Rooms”. This “Para-church” type ministry was popular 100 years ago in the North Western United States, and has seen a small revival in recent years. And consists of a church, group, or individual Christian for that matter, opening a room or rooms, where those in need of healing can go to be prayed for. The rooms operate in a similar style to a clinic; records are kept and people attend the rooms regularly until they have received their healing. Whilst I think that the work done in these “Healing Room” is laudable, I do have a slight problem with their method. It’s far too clinical, and has little bearing with what we see in the Bible, where people freely came for prayer when it was needed, and prayer was seen as an integral part of church life. Healing is after all central to the work of Christ. Psalm 103 says;

¹ Praise the LORD, O my soul;
 all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
² **Praise the LORD, O my soul,
 and forget not all his benefits—**
³ **who forgives all your sins
 and heals all your diseases,**
⁴ who redeems your life from the pit
 and crowns you with love and compassion,

It is clear that the Lord puts healing centre stage, right after forgiveness of sins. I believe that we err if we divorce the work of healing from the rest of church life, for that reason I emphasize the work of House Churches as what I call, Healing Communities.

To some extent all House Churches should be “Healing Communities”, places where folk can come and find acceptance, healing and wholeness, through the action of the Love of Jesus in His Church. This prevents the problem that some healing ministries have of latter integrating folk into church life. If folk find their healing in the context of the local church, they will continue to stay in that place of blessing. It is clear however that some house churches will wish to major on this ministry, it is those churches that I wish to address in this article.

What do I mean when I say “Healing Community”?

A healing community is whatever church that has especially dedicated a major part of it’s ministry to the work of healing people in body, mind and spirit. Obviously, in the context of the book I am referring to House Churches, but I have seen traditional churches that adequately fit the description of Healing Communities. But, a healing community is essentially a Church and not a Para-church structure.

What does a healing community do?

It’s church life in many respects is the same as any other church, yet within that life is seen an overwhelming desire for the wholeness and wellbeing of the individual. They work out in every sense the Greek word “diasozo”, which in it’s fullest sense means to save totally in every aspect, Physical, emotional and spiritual healing, wholeness and salvation. They normally give a lot of time to prayer for healing, but also to counseling and personal ministry.

Unfortunately healing is an area which seems to attract more than a few folk with extreme and strange ideas. It is an area that has, more than any other; been plagued with weird and false doctrines, many of which have just been torn wholesale from the world of secular psychology. I have studied secular psychology for years and want to say clearly that it

has very little of interest for the church. Starting from the false premise of man's goodness, and ability to find his own salvation, secular psychology builds into a Christ-less belief system akin to any religion. Sadly the last thirty years have seen two dangerous tendencies in the church. First has been the professionalization of counseling within the church (normally using secular techniques). This has led people's attention away from the Word of God, and into the dangerous field of secular psychology, with its Christ-less, cross-less philosophy. The second tendency is perhaps even more dangerous, it is of those people who understanding some of the shortfalls of secular psychology, have rejected it all together, and yet has without more thought Christianized some of the same techniques and philosophy espoused by the secular psychology that they have rejected. Using half understood therapy methods, mixed with poor theology, they seek to bring healing to many in the church. The problem is that they are not based firmly in the scriptures. Their methods and therapies have some short-term effect, but do little to really bring folk to a place where they can really find permanent healing in Jesus. Instead they bring the person into dependency on a method. People who do not respond to these normally short-term methods are often discarded, as not having enough faith or not really wanting to get healed. I have had umpteen people contact me, who have been through the mill of a thousand and one different counseling methods, both secular and Christian, and yet have not found healing. Some have spent 000's of dollars in fees and have nothing to show. Some of the organizations that back these methods offer training courses which claim to offer Ph.D's after watching a set of videos, others offer Ph.D's in one year, to previously unqualified people. This debases the educational system as well as the ministries themselves who are proving themselves to be nothing other than degree mills. Some of these false "Doctors" charge up to \$200, for a consultation. It all leaves rather a bad taste in the mouth. To be fair the majority of Christians who use fringe counseling techniques do not charge, and do so in a genuine desire to help.

If I don't agree with some of what goes on in the name of Christian Counseling and healing, what would I suggest that a Christian Healing Community put in its place? Well, first I think that we need to get away from a "Client-centered approach", and throw ourselves into a Jesus centered approach. Many of the folk that arrive for ministry with us, have become over the years the centre of their own universe, their illness, pain, problem or whatever has grown to such an extent that it blocks out the view of any answer. So in any ministry that we engage in we always start from the firm base that Jesus is the one with the answer for whatever need we may have (Psalm 46:1). When people come to us I always make it clear that we look to Jesus for the answer, not in any particular method or therapy.

The second point is that we commit ourselves to minister into the lives of folk until they choose to terminate the relationship. We have noticed that many ministries seem to terminate the any relationship that they have with the person seeking help as soon as they have prayed, ministered, or whatever they do. Who would go to a doctor who did not follow-up his treatment? Yet a lot of folk, pray or minister following their method, and that's it! If their ministry has some effect they are first to shout it from the roof-tops, but if it doesn't they never know. So they often claim a level of success that is far from real. Our commitment (similar to that of Healing Rooms), is that we will pray, minister and help until the person receives the healing that they are seeking. This clearly means a level of commitment beyond the normal. I'm often asked if we get time-wasters. Well, yes we do have our fair share of people dismissed by others as time wasters, but we reject that description totally. Just because a person doesn't have a breakthrough when we want them to, or don't experience the healing that we expect doesn't make them time wasters, it simple leaves them as folk who have yet to experience the healing that they need. More than once leaders and ministers have said to me, "Don't waste your time with that person". Others spoke about "Keith's lame ducks". Perhaps I'm pig headed

but that makes me more determined to reach out the hand of love to those in need and show them the love of God. And more than a few of those lame ducks learned to fly. There are some people, who after receiving ministry from us for a while, decide that they are seeking something else (normally they want some kind of quick fix), we simply bless them and send them on their way, assuring them that should they wish to return we would receive them. In this way we have seen people that have been passed by by many other ministries, come to a point of breakthrough, and receive the healing than they both need and desired.

The third area that needs to be emphasized is that we have no particular method as such. Each person who comes seeking help is an individual, with individual needs. Therefore we take each one before the Lord in prayer. Some simply need prayer for healing, so we accompany them in prayer, until they receive the healing that they so need. Others need time to work through their need with the Lord, so with give them time. Yet others need to be confronted about lifestyles or actions that have caused them harm. Then there are those who have been hurt by others, who need us to pour on the “oil and wine” of God’s love until such time as they are strong enough to start again. The only method we have as such is to soak the matter in prayer and listen to what the Lord says. I know that there are some who will feel defrauded by this answer, as they want some new improved super-spiritual quick fix. Well I’m sorry, but if prayer and doing the works of the Father suited Jesus and the Apostles, then it’s fine by me. Why is it that people try to improve on Gods way by trying to drag into the kingdom the castoffs of the world?

The forth element that I should mention is what I call Teddy Bear Therapy, a complete description is given in the final chapter, which is an article that I wrote for secular consumption about this “therapy” method. Really it is summed up by the word “friendship”, I have been amazed by the number of studies in recent years that have shown that people in stable marriages or with good friendships have better mental, emotional and physical health than those without. Please take time to read that chapter, and learn to be a Teddy Bear.

Earlier I spoke against some ministry techniques. Perhaps you are asking about the technique that you use, or have had used on you. Let me put forward some guide lines: If the technique adds to or takes away from the revelation of scripture, it’s not of God. If you have to learn more about secular Ideas than what the Bible says, it’s suspect. If it involves you or the person in need, participating in any type of visualization, reconstruction of something that didn’t happen or anything of that sort, it is believing a lie. If it builds your faith, without these things, if it draws you to Jesus and not the therapist or technique, then it’s probably good. If it builds the person in need into the Body of Christ, making them dependant on Him and His healing and sustaining power, then it’s good.

Finally a few practical pointers. When someone in need comes to your church, don’t treat them differently, but do acknowledge their need. Make sure that someone has their contact details and that someone calls them during the week to encourage their faith. If they don’t return, call them and ask if they would like the church to continue to pray for their healing. If their problem is of a personal or sensitive nature, they may prefer to share with one or two first, this should be allowed for. They should be encouraged to seek what the Lord’s word says about their situation, rather than your giving them your interpretation all the time. If they don’t have the ability or tools to do that, teach them. Believe me they will react much more strongly to what the Lord has taught them from His word, than what you teach them. Finally, some folk need to physically get away, so be open to that. Perhaps your church could help someone go to another healing community to stay for a while, or perhaps you or one of your members could welcome a needy (and often demanding) person into their home. Let’s give space for people to Grow and find Jesus as the answer to their needs.

Focused Compassion

*This chapter was originally an article published for general consumption called *Teddy Bear Therapy*. It has been published in several formats, and generally received with acclaim.*

Carl Rogers, the father of “Client Centered Therapy” and of pastoral counseling in general, spoke of the qualities needed by a counselor who would be able to help a client positively. He spoke of: -

- Honesty
- Transparency
- Genuineness
- Total Affirming Acceptance
- Caring
- Empathy
- Ability to keep a confidence
- Ability to actively listen
- Not being given to giving opinions
- The ability to allow the client to explore and find their own solution

Focused Compassion (FC), takes ideas about the character and qualities of a counselor a whole lot further.

Children are good judges of character and when they feel insecure, frightened or hurting, often turn to a teddy bear for comfort. After many years of observing Children in some of the most harrowing circumstances, I have come to the conclusion that there is something in the very nature of a teddy bear that aids in the healing process. Having thought deeply about this nature, I first postulated what I called teddy bear therapy, in 1990, whilst training a group of residential social workers in the south of England.

These social workers needed some basic listening and communication skills to enable them to help their charges express themselves within a residential situation (advocacy). Unfortunately, it is often the case that folk who have minimal counseling skills, suddenly think that they are Sigmund Freud, and start dispensing all sorts of amateur psychological advice. I therefore wanted to seek away of presenting real skills, which would be of real help, to real people, with real needs, without allowing the person to misunderstand the scope of their ability in helping others. Then something inside me said “teddy bears”. The outcome is what you are now reading.

Much of the theory of FC has its basis in the numerous bits of research showing the real value of empathetic friends who would simple be with someone in emotionally difficult situations. These days many folk don't have real heart friends with whom they can literally share anything without risk of rejection. Often folk feel embarrassed or ashamed to share with friends who may not understand, but anyone can share with a teddy bear.

Teddy bear therapy theory starts with certain attributes that teddy bears constantly display:

- Teddy Bears are always loyal.
- Teddy Bears are always faithful
- Teddy Bears are always your friend no matter what

- Teddy Bears always listen carefully to everything you say
- Teddy Bears are never shocked
- Teddy Bears will never tell
- Teddy Bears are honest
- Teddy Bears never hide things
- Teddy Bears are genuine (Like a Stieff bear)
- You **KNOW** your Teddy Bear loves you
- Teddy Bears care
- Teddy Bears empathize
- Teddy Bears are able to keep a confidence
- Teddy Bears never give opinions even when asked
- Teddy Bears allow room for their friends to explore their problems and seek their own solutions.
- Teddy Bears are cuddly and huggy, but never sexual
- Teddy Bears change their world through love!

So what do we do, go down to Toys-R-Us and buy a truckload of soft toys? Of course not. As the old song goes... people need people. But perhaps if those people were a little more like Teddy Bears there would be a little more love and healing in the world. So I use techniques, very similar to those taught to "Client Centered Counselors", to teach, "Accompanying skills". That is, we teach folk that there are times that to really help, they must become like Teddy Bears.

Some ask me about results. Well I can only say that for me this method has had startling and outstanding results. My wife and I have seen over and over again, how folk who have been counseled for years respond positively to a method that doesn't treat them as a "client" with a problem to be solved, but rather treats them as a friend who needs to be loved, no matter what. And these results are not just anecdotal. There are now innumerable studies proving that real friends accompanying and attending their friend during difficult and/or traumatic times positively help that person in a way significantly more than a professional therapist in the same situation.

One aspect of FC that is worth mentioning is it's Christian background. The group, to which I originally taught this "method", were all practicing evangelical Christians. I am a Christian, and this affects my thinking, philosophy and all that I do, and therefore has touched this work too. Client Centered Therapy starts with the false premise, that man is basically good, able to work out his own salvation. Both the Bible and a simple study of human nature, prove that man is basically messed up. That left to his own devices man will mess up time and time again. He needs help to get sorted. Other than Teddy Bears, who are still fallible and likely to come unstitched, the only one to consistently show real, 100% unconditional love, is Jesus Christ! And only He can REALLY change lives, although often he uses his grace filled servants.... I just call them Teddy Bears.

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