

Handbook for House Churches

provided by the Fellowship of Church Planters

25 Enterprise Center
Middletown, RI, 02482
U.S.A.

Outline

Preface

- 1 A word of caution
- 2 Background on discipling
- 3 Discipleship chains
- 4 The Church Illustrated
- 5 Overview of House Church Development
- 6 Stage 1: Gathering
- 7 Stage 2: Covenanting
- 8 Church Covenants
- 9 Peacemaking and discipline
- 10 Meetings of the House Church
- 11 Stage 3: Reproducing
- 12 Leadership in the House Church
- 13 Networking Leaders

Preface

A new wind is stirring in the land! A mere zephyr, but we expect it to become a hurricane which will alter the landscape of Christendom. The wind is the Spirit, who in our time is again doing new things. He is bringing renewal and transformation to the individual and corporate lives of His people, His church. The Fellowship of Church Planters has been swept up in this wind- -a new house church movement. Just as the student volunteer movement early in this century and the later para-church movement enabled the Holy Spirit to do mighty things, we believe that the house church will make a similar impact.

The purpose of this handbook is to share with others whom the Spirit is leading to pursue this new avenue of church life. It is an abbreviated version of what we have been more thoroughly developed in *A Manual for House Church Planting in Networks*. The abbreviated form is for ones who desire to have a house church experience, but do not necessarily need, or desire, the more thorough treatment of methods developed by and for a church planting team. It shares, in a very brief framework what we have been learning as we have established networks of House churches in Rhode Island and southern New England, for those who want to learn from our experiences and mistakes. It is not meant to be a slick formula for planting house churches.

We have shared these experiences with people outside of New England and in other parts of the world. Each opportunity has enabled us to learn more, how to distill church planting principles which may be transferrable to other cultures, as well as to learn things which apply to New England. Our goal is to enable you to enter into this experience.

We encourage to copy and adapt what you need for your group. We would appreciate your being in touch with us with new ideas as you learn. Our goal is not to have a polished book, but a usable handbook to stimulate and help those pursuing the Lord in through the life found in house churches. Other training materials, and the more complete manual can be obtained by contacting us at the address on the title page. These materials will be referred to sometimes in the handbook at the appropriate points.

We acknowledge the grace of our Lord as he has led us, often kicking and biting, into house church planting. We also acknowledge the tremendous contributions by each member of the Fellowship of Church Planters. We are especially indebted to the Fellowships of House Churches in R.I. who have so faithfully continued on the long and difficult road of church life and who have often dragged us on the team to new levels of house church experience.

Chapter 1

A Word Of Caution

We have embarked upon a great adventure: the house church and its related Fellowships. We find it exhilarating with all its volatility, which also often fills us with fear (That's part of exhilaration, isn't it?). But the question arises, how do we view those who are not partakers with us in the adventure?

We get so caught up in the exhilaration that we sometimes try to convert everyone to our methods! Scripture demands no hard and fast structure for church life. The very fact that so many forms of church life have existed from the early church to the present testifies to the many ways Scripture can be interpreted with respect to church structure. Someone has suggested that those looking for the "truly Biblical Church" are like a man in a dark room looking for a black cat that does not exist. Beware of the man who says he has found it. We appreciate the many benefits we find in the house church model, but we realize that's all they are, and there are liabilities as well. (These liabilities are explained later.)

We may be persuaded that the house church model is more effective for growth and reproduction in our particular place and time than conventional church structures. But that does not necessarily mean it is "more Biblical". The fact that the house church has been virtually non-existent in some societies and ages shows that God works through many different models of church life. We need to be tolerant of others even as we pursue the path in which God has led us. He uses many avenues and instruments to build his Kingdom. Para-church groups (CCC, IVCF, Navigators, etc.), various church groups (Baptist, Non-denominational, Pentecostal, etc.), and mission agencies, are all used by God to accomplish his complex purposes. He is so creative! Who are we to judge his instruments? A spirit of humility is needed to appreciate the beautiful variety within the Body of Christ.

In *Community and Growth*, Jean Vanier exhorts us:

"Once it (a church community) has found its own identity and discovered how the Holy Spirit is guiding it, it must be very attentive to the manifestations of the Spirit in others. It should not believe that it is the only community to have the privilege of being inspired by the Holy Spirit;..."

One of the signs of life in a community is the creation of links with others. An inward-looking community will die of suffocation. Living communities are linked to others, making up a huge reservoir of love for the world....It is a sign of maturity for a community to bind itself in friendship with others; it knows its own identity, so it doesn't need to make comparisons. It loves even the differences which distinguish it, because each community has its own gift which must flourish. These communities are complementary; they need each other. They are all branches of that unique community which is the church, the mystical body of Christ. He is the vine of which the communities are branches. I am always amazed by the multiplicity of communities which exist....Some are within the churches; others are outside any institution, bringing together young people

with prophetic institution who are looking for a new way of life. All these communities are part of the vast invisible church. Each is unique." p. 85,86

I Cor. 12:18 states: "But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired." God has gifted every believer and placed him/her in the body to accomplish His purposes. The context of this passage teaches that we should not be arrogant because of our place. This was a problem with the Corinthians (I Cor. 3:1-3, 11:18).

God also calls each church to fulfill a specific purpose in His Kingdom. We need to focus on that purpose for our church and fulfill it, without comparing the calling of our church to another's (Cf John 21:20-22). If we can help and encourage others in their calling, let us do so without pushing them to take up ours!

May God grant us the grace and humility to accept one another! May we repent of any arrogance regarding the house church! It is only part of God's plan, no matter how attractive it is to us. May God help us to "esteem others (other groups) greater than ourselves!" (Philippians 2:3)

Historically and around the world today, the house church movement has been making great contributions. Although in China, the former Soviet Union and Muslim countries, it has obviously been the primary way of extending the Kingdom of God, it is still an open question in the Western world. You may face criticism from other Christians as you pursue this path, so you need to go often to Jesus, the Man of Humility, to learn to repay criticisms with blessings. Chapter 2 Background on Discipling

In this chapter we lay the foundational principles for the life of a house church. The life of the church is found in the members. A growing house church will constantly need to be giving attention to newer members as well as upgrading the life and ministry of its older members. Much time, effort, and energy will go into the healing ministry of discipleship in the life of the members.

Discipling provides the building blocks of reproducing churches. Jesus commanded His apostles to "go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you". Their implementation of the plan is recorded in the book of Acts. And what was this implementation? The apostles went and planted churches. These churches, in turn, reproduced disciples who in turn went out and planted new churches. This cycle has reproduced itself down to the present age. The questions answered in this chapter is what does Scripture mean by discipling, and how does it bring reproduction?

The disciples, of course, were disciplined by the master, our Lord Jesus. Discipleship for Jesus was relational. He called his disciples to be with Him (Mark 3:14). He lived with them, ate with them, rejoiced with them, and wept with them. Over and over his love for them is stated and displayed. They were not students of a class He taught, nor were they "ministry projects" upon which he worked. They were brothers whom he loved and to

whom he was dedicated. He lived with them, worked with them, and loved them in such a way that their lives were changed forever. Such is the ministry of discipleship.

We see this discipling carried on in the ministry of Paul, both on his team and in the churches (Cf. Acts 20:17-38). The letters of Paul are filled with personal, often heart-wrenching exhortations, warnings, blessings, thanksgivings all of which reflect a highly relational ministry.

The ministry of Jesus and the early apostles reshaped broken, battered, carnal people in such a way that they soon also reflected the love of Christ. The apostles were merely the human agents of God's spirit who enables us to love God and our neighbor in practical ways. How did this happen? How does it happen today?

Scripture clarifies that we have been born into a fallen and broken world. God created us for fellowship with him and with one another. God created us to love and be loved. But the fall has fundamentally altered the face of our world. Instead of us giving and receiving love, we find ourselves battered by the sinfulness of this world which seeks for self rather than for others. We are born as sinners and are selfish by nature. We learn patterns of coping and survival which are self-centered (whether self-assertive or self-protective) and thus contrary to love. Crippled spiritually, we learn how to survive in a lost world, but it is a temporary survival which only leads to more pain later on, and more violations of God's plan of love.

Against this hopeless backdrop comes the man of hope, Jesus who is the Christ. He preaches good news of a new Kingdom--a kingdom of love, righteousness and peace. He lives such a life before the skeptical disciples and teaches them how to live it as well. He displays before them the ultimate act of selfless love by going to a cross and dying. Even worse, He is cut off from the Father, with whom he has enjoyed unbroken fellowship since before time began. He calls his disciples to follow him in suffering in this broken world. As they go they are to call out anyone who is willing to follow Him in His kingdom. Those who join them in this pilgrimage are trained along the way to love, even as Jesus showed and taught his disciples.

Thus Christianity is not simply a set of beliefs but a new life! Jesus Himself said that those who follow Him would be recognized by their love. Christianity is not a body of knowledge which needs to be imparted, but rather a relationship that needs to be practiced. Our Lord began the process; His gospel must be transmitted in flesh and blood rather than by a book alone. He Himself came as flesh and blood to live out the life of the Kingdom before his disciples. He was tempted and suffered as they would in the process of living the kingdom out in the fallen world. Wherever His disciples went they modeled the kingdom. To those who followed they imparted the principles of kingdom living. They often remained for a time to help new disciples begin practicing life in the kingdom, learning as the original disciples did with Jesus, that it was not easy and there would be many failures from which they could learn and grow.

THE DISCIPLING NATURE OF THE KINGDOM

Since God's calling to us is relational in nature (He has called us to love him and love our neighbor) obviously a relational church is necessary to obey his calling. But obedience to His command to love is not a one time act of joining a church, for relationships do not work that way.

When we get married, the wedding signifies not the end of the relationship, but the beginning. The rest of one's married life is spent exploring, failing, and learning new ways to love. If the wedding day is the highlight of a marriage it is a sad relationship indeed!

In the same way when we enter into salvation we begin a new journey into a new kingdom. We are like immigrants leaving our old world and coming to a new country. New customs must be learned. A new language, new ways to do old things like money management, ordering the home, etc. We enter the Kingdom of God.

We often resist change; as we progress in this new life we find old ways die hard. We find that we are still self-promoting or self-protective. We find that we still love ourselves more than we love God and much more than we love our neighbor. We find that we are fearful, lonely, tired. We find that God does not always seem near. This kingdom is not what we expected. There are times when our mind wanders back to "Egypt" and the old life beckons.

But God never meant us to walk the life alone, nor did He desire us to learn the ins and outs of this new kingdom only from the pages of a book. Just as our Lord became incarnate to show forth the kingdom, He, through His Holy Spirit, is incarnating Himself in those who are following Him. Those who have progressed in the kingdom are called to display kingdom living to the newer ones and mentor them over the difficult obstacles in the road.

The church is the family in which this dynamic exchange occurs. Older ones in the Lord help newer believers. In so doing, they must learn to love these new ones who are often not lovable. As these older ones do so, they face the obstacles to love in their own life. The Lord uses unlovely ones to reveal to us our own selfishness. We are required to repent and be renewed in order to love and serve them. Thus not only do mature believers model the life of the kingdom and teach its precepts to the unlovely new ones, but they grow through the process. Thus the whole church is continually being transformed from one stage of glory to another as each one learns how to love more perfectly.

As you see above, discipleship means a dynamic relationship that brings God's healing to the crippled state into which we are all born and nurtured. The healing is for both the discipler and the disciple.

Chapter 3

Discipleship Chains

In this chapter we are going to focus on how more mature believers can pass on what they have learned to newer believers. We will call these mature believers "disciplers", and those they teach "disciples". As older ones train younger ones who in turn train new followers of Jesus we can call this interlinking set of relationships a discipleship chain. You might look at 2 Timothy 2:2 for Paul's exhortation to Timothy to develop such a chain.

Having said this, however, it is good to remember that Jesus called his followers to be "disciples" or learners. We are in that learning process from the moment we come to Christ to the day we die. In this sense we are always in a "discipleship chain". This is a "chain" which began with Jesus himself, in which an older believer discipled a younger one, who discipled others. We focus on the "output" of the chain in this paper, but it is important for those in leadership to be certain that there is adequate input. This may come often through short-term commitments to a mentor. Marriage enrichment studies, prayer partnerships, studies in a Bible book together, undergoing intense training of a particular type for a stated period of time will all add to the ongoing discipling of a leader. For me it has often meant going to the "ends of the earth" to find someone who can help me in my quest "to press on the high calling in Christ Jesus" (Ph 3:14).

But now to the "output" of your discipleship chain. Jesus called his disciples to Him and began to instruct them in the ministries he gave to them. In the same way our discipleship's primary emphasis is "equipping the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:12). The goal should not be simply to impart knowledge, but rather equipping the saints to minister. Therefore theological training alone will not be the vehicle by which we disciple, but rather getting our disciple involved in ministry and then training him theologically as he needs to apply it to his ministry.

The First Link in the Chain

For practical application, let us look at discipleship chains in the context of starting a church. A church can be started by anyone (church planter, elder, shepherding deacon, even a new believer), but for the purposes of this paper we will refer to him as a "church planter" even if he is going to remain as a leader of the church and not be itinerant. Let us suppose that the church planter is focusing on a new believer. His hope is to penetrate that new believer's social circle and start a house church. Immediately a discipleship chain is formed with the first link between the church planter and the new believer. (A link can form even before he is a believer!) If that believer is married, then a second link forms between him and his wife.

The new believer's training could focus on two practical areas:

1. Shepherding his wife. If she is an unbeliever, he begins to read scripture in the home and share God's plan of salvation and Kingdom living with his wife. Reading schedules

can be developed to help a new believer do this. He should be encouraged to read these daily (often at the end of a meal, as a regular discipline), taking 3 minutes or so to discuss the passage. This should not be preaching, but a brief time of exploring the passage. If he has children they need to be involved. A husband should always be trained to shepherd his wife and children. This must receive high priority in his discipling. Older believing women should also disciple younger women, but her husband **MUST** be involved. Often marriage counseling may be needed to break down barriers which have been built over years. But here also, the church planter should not usurp the place of the husband as head of the home. **THE HUSBAND MUST TAKE RESPONSIBILITY** to love and shepherd his wife. This discipleship is ongoing. All leaders need accountability to continue enriching their marriages.

2. Sharing the evangel with those of his social circle. One's social circle includes relatives, friends, co-workers, etc. We are **NOT** talking about handing them a tract and preaching the "4 spiritual laws". We mean a careful, thoughtful presentation of his or her personal testimony as to why his or her life is changing. This can be difficult, especially with relatives and close friends. Hopefully, during the evangelism stage, the new believer learns that salvation brings him into a new kingdom where life is different. Being translated into God's Kingdom is like moving to a new country. We put off old patterns of life which are not in keeping with the new country and put on new ones (Cf. Eph. 4:17-24, Col. 1:13). This can be quite frightening to people close to the new Christian, but explaining the change is the most natural way to convey the gospel. New believers need to be taught how to do this. A study of John 9, including the cost of following Christ, can be very helpful. A theological analysis on salvation is not usually helpful at this stage; it makes salvation cognitive rather than transformational.

For church planting, the goal of evangelism is to start a gathering meeting with those in one's social circle who may be interested. As he begins the above steps he looks for 2 or 3 people from his social group who will gather to study God's word.

The Second and Third Links in the Chain:

At this stage the seeds of disaster are most likely to be sown. As the new believer gathers his friends and relatives, **HE** needs to be encouraged to follow up on these himself, imparting to them the very things **HE HAS LEARNED** in getting the gathering group going. At this point he should be having a family Bible study time (3-5 minutes a day). He should also be evangelizing his social circle. He teaches these newer ones the same things. The great mistake made at this point is that the new contacts are followed up by the church planter! As a result, the group becomes a one-link-discipleship-chain-church, i.e. everyone attaches to the church planter and not to one another. When the church planter leaves, the house church will fall, since they will have become dependant on the church planter. If the church planter remains (as say an elder) he has developed a dependant church and quenched the every member ministry which the Holy Spirit desires.

Of course some might argue that the church planter can do a better job following up the new contacts. That may be true, but what he can't do better is reproduce the disciple. For churches to reproduce, discipleship reproduction must be the primary goal. In order for this to happen, the disciple must be trained to pass on what he has learned at the earliest possible moment. By passing on what he learns to another person, he will learn it better, and will reproduce himself in the process. My experience is that if it is done very early, it happens naturally. The longer you wait, the more likely a new convert will try to excuse himself from the responsibility by looking at his inadequacies rather than the power of Christ! (Cf. 2 Cor. 3:4-6). After a short while it is virtually impossible reverse this passivity which then permeates the church!

As soon as a gathering meeting begins, the new believer follows up on those he invites. He does this by simply passing on what he has just learned from the church planter about Kingdom living and evangelism. Thus the new ones begin to penetrate THEIR social circles for the gospel. The second link is forged in the chain as your disciple disciples his family and friends.

If a flood of people come to Christ, then two possibilities present themselves:

1. You sit down with your disciple and prayerfully decide who should shepherd whom. The church planter seeks first to mobilize another person with potential to start a new gathering. The church planter should not disciple more than 2 people in any one house church. In this way 1-link disciple chains can be avoided.
2. If you can't disciple everyone in the above manner, then the ones not being shepherded should become a 3rd link in the chain; i.e. your disciple's disciple is helped to begin working with another new believer, passing on what he has learned from your disciple (once again, likely shepherding his family and evangelizing his social circle).

THREE LINK DISCIPLES CHAINS MUST BE SET UP IF THERE WILL BE REPRODUCTION. 2 Tim. 2:2 exhorts Timothy to aim for 4-link discipleship chains. 4-link chains will ensure you reproduction of reproducing (think it through!), and thus of churches which plant churches.

Discipleship Chains and Leadership Development

If discipleship chains are kept up during all stages of house church development, leaders emerge naturally and relationally. Normally, in the latter part of the covenanting stage (See below) or shortly after, two of the men will be formally recognized as being the ones God is using to develop the group. The men could be appointed as elders, deacons or whatever you choose to call your leaders. (Remember, women lead women also so their needs to be recognized leadership here as well!)

Elders would be at the beginning of a discipleship chain within a church. (Remember that all of us should be in a discipleship relationship--and that chain may extend outside of the church. For instance, the church planter should leave once an elder is in place. But he

would be available for ongoing help and may remain as a "mentor" of the elder). A provisional elder or shepherding deacon would always be in the second link, accountable to an elder or church planter.

Chains should be set up man to man and woman to woman. The husband will always be involved with his wife, but there are certain things that are appropriate for other women to teach his wife (Cf. Titus 2:3-5). Women's discipleship chains are crucial for the health and survival of the church. We recommend women to be appointed as shepherding deacons at the top of each discipleship chain of women in the church. A women shepherding deacon would, of course, be accountable to her husband or an elder.

Other materials for use with your disciple may be developed as barriers are exposed and thus growth and transformation is required in order to progress to higher stages of Christian growth. The Fellowship of Church Planters has developed many materials to assist in this. A materials list will be provided to any requesting it.

We now turn to the definition of the church we need for this kind of discipleship

Chapter 4

The Church Illustrated

We believe that God's salvation is corporate in nature rather than individual. By this we mean that God intends through our salvation to purchase for Himself a people (Cf. Mt. 1:21, I Peter 2:9f) who join Him in the cosmic warfare in which He has been engaged since the fall of Satan (Cf. Revelation 12:10,17, Ephesians 3:10,11, 6:10-12).

Although God saves men and women individually, His purpose is to add them as subjects to His kingdom where they join with others in this cosmic struggle. Thus, all new believers need to be added to the body of Christ (Acts 2:41) where they can find their place of ministry (I Corinthians 12:18) and the purpose that God had for them when he saved them (Philippians 3:12, Colossians 1:24-28).

The church of God is made up of local churches. These local churches are groups of believers who are committed to obey Jesus Christ and to be accountable to one another for carrying out His plan for them. This simple definition of the church is like defining the Rockies as a mountain range; it fails to summarize the beauty and majesty of these mountains. To get a better glimpse of God's great mystery, we must go beyond a mere definition to illustrations of the church. These illustrations give insight from which we can develop the functions and structures of the church.

The Church as a Pilgrim People (eg. a wagon train):

An illustration of the church would be a wagon train. We are pilgrims caravanning to a better country. Much like Israel coming out of Egypt, our goal is to arrive at a promised land and (for the sake of the analogy) to raid Satan's kingdom along the way taking prisoners who will join us in our journey.

Each one in the train of wagons has a job to do. God has given each one gifts, talents and resources to be shared with the others so that the goal can be reached. When attacks come and the wagons are circled, each wagon must prevent the evil one from penetrating the community and destroying it. As we travel together, grow together, succeed and fail together, we get to know each other and help one another as new trials occur.

The process is as important as the goal. Our calling is relational. The warfare is such that love (From God) overcomes the attacks of the evil one. God has called His people to love: to love him and to love one another. When He first called us we were not predisposed to love, nor did we know how to love. As a matter of fact, the rest of our Christian life will be spent learning to love. When we join the wagon train (not just ride near it), we find many who are offensive to us, that irritate us, and that are just plain wrong in their view of things (for we, after all, are always right). As we travel together this leads to conflict and discomfort. But these very difficulties also enable us to learn to love. And when the enemy attacks, we see these people that we find hard to love fulfilling crucial roles; our new appreciation for them allows a foundation from which

love can spring. In the process of getting to the promised land we learn how to love---if we submit to the lesson!

The Church as a Family:

God has called us first into relationship with Himself. He has set His love upon us like a banner, and claims us as His children. This love led Him to send His unique son to die on a cross and purchase us, that we might be adopted sons in His family. He has called us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. He gives us His Holy Spirit who continues His work in us until we are remade in the image of His Son.

But He has also called us into relationship with the other members of His family. He has called us not only to receive His infinite love, but also to pass on that love. God wants his invisible love to be made visible on earth through our love for each other in His family, the Church.

This illustration of the church as a family with children is the most pervasive in the New Testament. God's plan for the family is reproduction. Adam and Eve were commanded to fill the earth. God's ideal was for one generation of healthy, godly families to produce another generation of godly families and so on down to the present. Of course the fall into sin messed this up. Yet a godly family is the foundation of society and of the church community. So this remains God's plan for His people.

God has called us into His family. He is our Father. We are His sons and daughters. Others in His Kingdom are our brothers and sisters. And yet we are so ill equipped to carry out his plan as a family! Most of us learned family life in our flawed, earthly families. We learned wrong ways of coping with those who sinned against us and we sinned in return. We learned early in life wrong ways of relating to those in authority as well as to our peers. Much of our Christian life will be spent unlearning these natural reactions and relearning how to love in deed and in truth.

The church is the place for the family members to learn this new way of life. The house church, because of its size and ability to give more personal attention, is an ideal setting for these lessons. Discipling relationships are developed as older Christians teach newer ones to love God and their neighbor. As the group undergoes the natural conflicts in family relationships, barriers to love arise from the flesh. These are dealt with by those who shepherd and disciple the sheep. In this small church environment, patterns which cripple our ability to love are compassionately brought into the light and we repent of them. New patterns are learned and practiced under the loving care of a mentor who helps us move toward love and service (Cf. Galatians 5:13-15).

In this family context each member of the house church often painfully learns to function in a family to carry out God's plan for the church. Each member learns how selfish they are. But they also learn how to bear such revelation, being covered by the blood of the lamb. Individual care also enables them to grow through these failures by the grace of God, as they learn repentance and restitution which leads to further growth.

In this family context believers learn to die to their own selfish agenda as they cooperate with and submit to the corporate wisdom of the community. They learn selfless service as they see needs in the body and move to meet those needs sacrificially. They learn in humility the limitations of their gifts and talents, and the benefits of mutual dependence that God provides in his church.

As conflicts arise, we run up against others selfish desires and see how they cause our own flesh to erupt. We then learn new, godly ways to deal with conflict. We learn the crucial lessons of repentance, restitution, forbearance and forgiveness.

The leaders, of course, learn much about leading by loving, guiding, shepherding and nurturing (as opposed to leadership by edict. Cf. Mt. 21). They learn God's wisdom of plural leadership in the church. They learn to cooperate with other leaders, and how to influence them as well as work through conflict with them.

Above all, the members of the church learn how to love, practicing for the perfect Kingdom which is yet to be revealed in all its fullness. But when it is, we will recognize it as our home!

Chapter 5

OVERVIEW OF HOUSE CHURCH DEVELOPMENT

God has called his church into being and given it His marching orders: to extend His Kingdom to the uttermost parts of the earth. In every generation the challenge is the same: to publish the good news that Jesus Christ has indeed come to extend His Kingdom by inviting whoever will follow him to become part of His global plan of conquest.

In order to complete the task, the church must understand its purpose and constantly evaluate its progress in fulfilling the commands of its savior. For us, this means developing a church which constantly reproduces. By reproducing disciples, leaders, churches, church planters, and church planting teams, we are answering the call of Christ here in Rhode Island, and, as God gives us grace, to regions beyond.

The house church has presented us with a structure simple and flexible enough to enable continued and unrestrained reproduction. Like a virus, under the right conditions it can replicate itself rapidly and adapt to new conditions. However, it can also turn inward, crystallize, and become an isolated small group of self-centered "naval gazers". Let us be the guerilla invasion force God has called us to be!

To avoid the common pitfalls of a small church, we must know where we are going and how to get there. Then we must ruthlessly evaluate our progress, not by some absolute, legalistic, human standard, but by prayerfully looking at the health of our church, the call of God to reach the lost around us and beyond, and the motives of our heart as we "plunder the strong man's house".

Each house church will be different, but experience reveals common goals and problems. The order in which problems arise, the speed at which the church comes to grips with them, and how they overcome them will vary from church to church. Materials have been developed by the Fellowship of Church Planters to overcome problems, both of individuals and groups. More materials will be needed in the future and those already developed will constantly undergo revision according to the needs. These are available upon request.

The next chapters expand on the 3 stages we have found normative in birthing a house church. We assume the church planter is starting from scratch. Each stage has a goal, out of which arises a project and from which activities flow. You are encouraged to use these as a starting point and adapt them to your needs. Below is a summary of the three stages.

Stage 1: Gathering

GOAL: Two church planters gather a group of 2 or 3 family units who realize that God's plan is to extend the gospel through the church.

PROJECT: The church planters find a man/woman of peace who can gather members of his/her social circle to become the nucleus of a house church.

ACTIVITIES: The church planters train the man/woman of peace to penetrate his/her social circle. Gathering meetings begin.

Stage 2: Covenanting

GOAL: The two or three families covenant together to be the church.

PROJECT: The families write a covenant which embodies the relational commands of the new testament regarding the church.

ACTIVITIES: Community meetings begin, overseen by one church planter. The other moves on to other gatherings. Initial leadership emerges. Discipleship chains begin.

Stage 3: Reproducing

GOAL: The church begins other gatherings which lead to the formation of new house churches.

PROJECT: The church writes and implements a vision statement which outlines the goals for evangelism and edification which they believe the Lord has for them.

ACTIVITIES: Initial leadership is appointed. The church planter lowers his profile. Leaders take more responsibility for shepherding.

Chapter 6

STAGE 1: GATHERING (dating)

GOAL: Gather a group of 2 or 3 family units who realize that God desires them to form a church.

PROJECT: Get a group of seekers or believers to meet and look into the Word to see God's plan for mankind (the church!).

ACTIVITIES: The most important activity during this phase is evangelism. This evangelism, however, does not focus on gaining individual disciples, but rather on gathering a group of disciples into a loving, committed body--the church.

The Church Planter may begin by winning a single person to Christ. But he emphasizes not only the person of Christ, but the corporate salvation to which the convert is called. Evangelism should include a focus on the Kingdom of God and the new life to which He calls us. Group or individual studies in Matthew (Cf. Chs. 1, 5-7, 12, 13, 16, 18, etc.) and Acts (Chs. 1-11) are helpful for this. We have developed some studies on Entering the Kingdom and Living in the Kingdom for training a convert to become a corporate disciple. They are available upon request.

As soon as possible, a gathering meeting should be arranged where a new believer or a seeking unbeliever can bring his family and friends to hear about the good news. Thus the gospel can penetrate that person's social circle. It is best if this occurs on his "turf"--his house, or a relative's, or an interested friend--any place unbelievers will gather (Cf. Cornelius, Acts 10; Matthew, Mt.9; Zaccheus, Lk. 19). The gathering meeting usually lasts over a definite period of time, with a specified purpose for the "studies". For example, 6 studies in Matthew on the Kingdom of God, or 4 in Acts on the church, or a single meeting to see the Jesus film. New friends can come at any time, and people can of course stop coming. At the end of this specified period a new set of studies might be proposed, to help the group embrace God's purpose for them to become a church.

At all costs, a new believer or seeker should not be extracted from his social circle into an already existing church until his circle has been evangelized. (The exception to this rule would be an alcoholic or drug user if his social circle would keep him entrapped.) Each new social circle represents a potential new house church; do not alienate the convert from his people. Only if he is alienated already, should he be shepherded into an already existing house church where he can develop new friends and relationships. But this should only happen after every effort has been made to reconcile him to his social circle.

The goal of this gathering stage, once again, is for 2 or 3 family units to commit to follow Christ by committing themselves to become a church. Obviously then, the church itself is an important part of the evangelistic studies. These deal with Jesus and His body, the church (Cf. Acts 28:30f).

There may be some individual discipling during this first stage, but the primary thrust is to penetrate the social circle. Therefore, a gathering meeting must be the goal of individual discipleship. We teach the seeker or new believer to explain the call of God to his Kingdom to his family and friends through his personal testimony (John 9) and Bible stories. The goal of the gathering meetings is to find 2 or 3 believers committed to becoming the church.

As we move into the second stage of house church development, the group moves on to the Covenanting and Reproduction stages. It should keep having at least one gathering meeting in order to penetrate new social circles for the Kingdom. When all the social circles represented by those in the church have been exhausted, the church prays and plans to penetrate new ones. We teach and help every believer to penetrate his social circle for Christ and to take the responsibility for learning how to do it. It may be the only opportunity God ever gives those in that particular circle to hear the good news. Every single social circle represented in a house church presents a potential new house church.

We call this Gathering stage the dating stage because we get to know each other and begin to bond to one another.

Chapter 7

STAGE 2: COVENANTING (Engagement/marriage)

GOAL: Have the 2 or 3 families covenant together to be the church, ministering to each other.

PROJECT: Write a covenant defining the relationship believers are to have in their church.

ACTIVITIES: Once the church planter has gathered 2 or 3 families who see that it is God's will for them to become the church, the next step is to commit themselves to be all that God calls them to be as the church. We do this through a covenant. The covenant enables the 2 or 3 families to define their relationship. They commit themselves to keep learning and applying the lessons of love and thus live out the community life of the church. Part of the covenant's statement relates how the community lives out the life of Christ and calls others to follow. Thus growth and reproduction are part of the covenant.

During the gathering meetings, as spelled out in the booklet *Entering the Kingdom*, a person declares himself to be in the Kingdom by repenting, being baptized, and added to the church (Acts 2:37-41). We encourage church planters not to count converts until they take these 3 steps of initiation. Therefore the first families understand the importance of obedience to the Lord in these basic activities. We focus on the 3rd activity (being added to the church) in the covenanting stage. Sometimes we wait to baptize until they have agreed on a covenant, and sometimes we baptize first, depending on the nature of the group. Likewise, sometimes we wait to celebrate the Lord's table until covenanting, and sometimes we begin before. Remember, this is the engagement phase, so we want to make sure they move through it and don't get comfortable in it. Otherwise it is kind of like living together--some of the benefits without the bond (which will be essential once the honeymoon wears off).

At this stage in the development of the house church we begin a Community meeting. In America we would probably meet on a Sunday, although the primary consideration should be when the families can actually meet regularly. The meeting will often consist of a worship time and a planning time. The planning time may include teaching, but it can also be for implementing what has been learned (like writing the covenant). Usually in preparation for a study time, a reading schedule is prepared by the church planter to be used in the homes of those forming the community. Families first study in the home what will be covered at the community meeting. Thus the heads of the home are taught early to take responsibility for shepherding in the home.

For male heads of home, this is the first step in developing leaders, since leaders must care for their homes. These reading schedules assign a few verses each day, with a question to start discussion. The families are encouraged to spend 3-5 minutes each day reading the assigned Scripture and discussing the question, usually around a meal time. This forces people out of the passive learner's role so prevalent in churches today. The

community meeting's teaching is often simply sharing what God has taught the family in his Word that week.

Reading schedules during this stage might include verses or stories from Acts, Ephesians, the "one another" verses of the Bible, or a topical study on The Church. Reading schedules are available from the Fellowship of Church Planters or can be developed by the church planter. Remember, the purpose of the studies is to fulfill the project for this stage: write a covenant which defines the group's relationships.

Community meetings should be divided between worship, study and applying the studies to drawing up a covenant. The Lord's table should be included during the worship time. The male heads of households should be taught to officiate at the Lord's table. Leadership of the various aspects of the meetings should be shared by all the men who covenant, on a rotating basis. The community meetings should be for believers interested in covenanting, not unbelievers! Separate men's meetings may be helpful at this point, to equip them to lead both in their own families as well as the family of God (the community meetings). Separate meetings for women can also be helpful as they will find different challenges from the men. Leading women can emerge at these times.

Gathering meetings should continue and expand as other social circles are penetrated by the group. If two itinerant church planters are working together it may be wise to determine which one will head the work, and focus on leadership development. The other should focus on new gatherings. A whole new social circle might be penetrated while the group progresses through this stage; a second work would begin. Twins are planted! During this covenanting stage the church planter trains new men to help lead both the community meetings, and the gathering. The church planter focuses on training one or two key men. As new people are added to the gathering meetings and become believers, those who brought them take responsibility to ground them in the faith. We have developed materials to help young believers shepherd new believers into the community. These who bring new ones are taught to shepherd. Leadership develops naturally around these discipleship "chains". Men shepherd men and women shepherd women. Discipleship chains emerge along relational lines.

Those attending gathering meetings are encouraged, upon becoming believers, to attend the community meetings. The purpose of gathering is to show people the complete salvation which God has wrought in Christ, which includes the corporate (church) aspect of salvation. They normally are brought through the initiation activities of repentance, baptism and preparation for covenanting by the person who brought them. The "spiritual parent" is often the one who baptizes the new person.

Writing a covenant with its corresponding Bible studies and community interaction can be fun and helps build a loving community. This is why we call it the engagement stage. We have committed ourselves to marriage, but aren't married yet. But during this stage conflict often begins as well. The community begins to become a healing organism. People learn new ways to deal with conflict, selfishness, etc. In our experience, during the covenanting stage we have times when we despair of the group ever coming together.

Most groups covenant, because dissolving the relationship becomes more a painful alternative than resolving the conflicts. When this happens you have a church, supernaturally touched by God and ready to live out its covenant. The covenanting stage is painful, but rewarding.

The covenanting stage ends with *Covenanting Together as a church* (usually after drawing up the covenant and studying the booklet *Covenanting Together as a group*). We refer to the covenanting stage as engagement and marriage.

Chapter 8

Church Covenants

The goal of the covenanting stage is to produce a covenant based on God's expectations of His people as a church. The covenant focuses on the interpersonal relationships that God requires of His people. This paper explains why we use a covenant to define the membership of the church. Each church writes its own covenant. The covenant should focus on relationship, not doctrine. Jesus taught that the defining characteristic of his people would be their love for one another. A quick review of the "one another" verses of the New Testament and of the life of the early church (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32ff) confirm this. Thus, the covenant is a summary of the relational expectations God has for his people's fellowship as the church. The covenant should be "inclusive" that is, any Christian should be able to sign such a covenant. A sample covenant appears at the end.

This is one area where we find people often balk. However a church must find a way to define itself and its membership. If it does not, it will likely never develop into much more than a Christian club where people come and go as they please. There may be several ways to define a church, and we explain why we use covenants here. You may choose a different way, but whatever way you choose it should include the concept of becoming the people of God.

In our house churches, a church formally comes into existence when a group of two or three families commit themselves to one another by ratifying the covenant. In the West we ratify it by signing it, since this is consistent with making contracts (covenants) in other spheres of life. Each member signs a personal copy which he/she keeps. They also sign a common copy which someone in the church keeps. Often the covenant signing ceremony will be accompanied with baptisms, since we might wait to baptize new believers until the church is ready for birth.

The Covenantal Basis For Defining The Church

The church may be defined as a community of believers committed to living out the corporate life of the kingdom before the world and the heavenly realm (Ephesians 2:11-3:10). This paper addresses how membership in a local church community can be defined. Some may argue that the church and its membership does not need to be defined, but rather we ought to let the Spirit define it. But the New Testament makes it clear that there were churches in different cities and that these were not buildings, but congregations of people (Acts 14). They knew who they were and were aware of their membership (Cf. I John 2:19, Ephesians 3:6, 4:25, Romans 12:5). The community was so carefully defined that when a believer went from one community to another it was normal for him/her to carry a commendation from his/her former community to the new community (Cf. Romans 16:1,2).

BAPTISM

What was the vehicle by which a person became a member of a church in the first century? The way one entered into the community in the early church was baptism. Baptism was a public statement that the initiate had turned from his old life (which involved the worship of particular god's) to embrace a new life (Acts 2:37-41). This testimony thus had two components: a vertical one between the person and God, whereby he disavowed his old god and turned to the true God; and a horizontal component which involved inclusion in a new community, the church. When public, it was often accompanied by persecution. Baptism was an excellent vehicle to define who was and who was not in the community. It still is in many cultures.

Today, in Western culture, baptism is seldom understood as having a horizontal component (new relationships within the Christian community). Baptism is rather seen as symbolic of a personal decision with only a vertical component (of the individual following Jesus). In churches where it has lost its horizontal component (commitment to God's people), it no longer defines meaningful membership in the church. There are many people who have been baptized who are not members of any local assembly, nor do they understand why they ought to be. Perhaps some differences in our modern society contribute to this. In the first century the community to which a person belonged (a guild, mystery religion, church, etc.) was the social/welfare network for that person and his family. Today, this role is taken by the government. Thus a person does not depend upon an intimate community in time of need. We have tried in times past to teach the horizontal component of baptism and thus utilize it as the vehicle for defining community, but without success in our Western culture. The Christian culture in America is so influenced by the "individual commitment" understanding of Baptism, that the horizontal component remains hidden for many.

So if Baptism is not a good vehicle for defining membership in an assembly in our culture, what is? We will explore three other vehicles which have been used historically in defining membership in an assembly: a covenant, a constitution, and articles of faith.

COVENANT

We believe a covenant is the most suitable vehicle in our culture for defining membership in the church. A covenant places the emphasis on the church as an organism of living relationships rather than an institutional organization. This is the obvious emphasis of the book of Acts and the epistles; the New Testament church was a body of believers identified by their deep intimate inter-personal relationships (which neither came nor were maintained with ease). The relationships that believers enjoyed was based solely on the relationship that each one shared with Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. The relational responsibility among believers is exemplified by Jesus' relationship with his disciples (Cf. John 13, 17), and is defined in the many "one another" verses in the New Testament, as well as in passages such as I Cor 12, Galatians 5f, Colossians 3, Ephesians 4-6.

The relationship believers have with God is a formal covenantal relationship. God has always worked with his people through covenants, and his people are often expected to

respond to God's covenantal love by entering into covenant with one another (See "Covenanting Together", Appendix 12). In our culture, the marriage covenant serves as an example of a covenant which defines a relationship. A marriage covenant establishes the expectations that a husband and wife have in the marriage relationship.

A church covenant can be an excellent way to define the expectations which believers ought to have with one another in a particular assembly, and should be based on God's commands regulating relationships among believers. Thus, a church covenant identifies the expectations of the members of the community which we call the church. It establishes the fact that to become a part of the church a believer enters into a **RELATIONSHIP** with the other believers in the assembly. It sets the parameters of the relationship. In our independent thinking culture, it also serves to bind those who would leave the covenant community for spurious reasons, which short-circuit God's plan for sanctification both for the church and the individual. Since the reformation, covenants have often been used to define the membership of churches, especially by anabaptists.

CONSTITUTION AND ARTICLES OF FAITH

The other two ways mentioned to define community membership (Constitution and Articles of Faith) have serious deficiencies our culture. The traditional constitution is borrowed from the corporate world. It defines the church as an organization rather than an organism. As such it defines membership as being part of a corporate institution, with the constitution defining the way in which the institution is run. It may be important for churches to develop constitutions at some point, but not as a vehicle for defining membership. It does not work in forming the church into a loving community. We have likened a house church to a virus which needs to mutate rapidly to adapt to changing conditions. A constitution fixes the operation of a church and keeps it from adapting. For this reason we have found typical, traditional constitutions to be counterproductive not only for defining the membership of the church but also in the operations of a house church. We have found that a family conference approach, using Scripture and led by godly elders, is more helpful in the decision making (for more on this see Appendix XI, Consensus Decision Making).

Using articles of faith as a vehicle for defining membership suffers from the same drawback of not treating the church as a living community. In this case the connection with the church is based on a system of belief rather than a commitment to relationship, as has been more common in denominational churches. Another drawback is that articles of faith, rather than distinguishing believers from unbelievers usually serve to distinguish between different types of believers. For example, views on end times, election, predestination, scripture, spiritual gifts, are almost always included with the understanding that "our kind" of Christians are welcome here. What an affront to the unity of relationship which Christ calls us to have (John 17:21-24)! If a believer is included in God's heavenly church, how can we use such distinctions to exclude him from our local assembly? For these reasons we believe that the church covenant is a good vehicle for defining membership in a local assembly. Apart from the Bible it is the most

important document in the church, since it sets forth the expectation of members of the community; and the community is the body of Christ.

Sample House Church Covenant WICKENDEN ST. HOUSE CHURCH COVENANT

Responding to and reflecting God's covenant that he has made with His people through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:16f, Jeremiah 31:31-34), we covenant with one another to be the church known as "the Wickenden St. House Church". This is a binding commitment that by the grace of God each member will faithfully uphold. As baptized believers in Jesus Christ, we realize that the purpose of God for believers is carried out through his divine plan, the Church, as reflected by local assemblies. This local assembly exists so that "the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 3:10), specifically by worshipping God, edifying the believers, and spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I. We commit to love one another (I John 4:7) by: Building up one another (Ephesians 4:29), Encouraging one another (Hebrews 3:13), Serving one another (I Peter 4:10), Praying for one another (Ephesians 6:18), Exhorting one another (Hebrews 10:24), Rebuking and correcting one another (II Timothy 4:2), When necessary, discipling one another (Matthew 18:15-17), Bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2), Forgiving one another (Colossians 3:13), Doing nothing that would cause a brother to stumble (Rm. 14:13), Maintaining unity with one another (Ephesians 4:3), Obeying God's word (John 14:23), Meeting together regularly for fellowship and breaking of bread (Hebrews 10:25, Acts 2:42), Contributing financially to the church (II Corinthians 8:1-5, 9:7) and the relief of the poor (Galatians 2:10), and Submitting to our leaders (Hebrews 13:17).

II. As a corporate body, A. We commit to love those outside the church (Luke 10:27-37) by evangelizing (Matthew 28:19-20)

B. Also, we commit to love other churches (Acts 11:22-30): Resolving to be joined in fellowship with other churches in the East Providence Fellowship of House Churches, we as a church commit to uphold the other churches in our immediate fellowship.

III. In our personal lives, we commit to love God (I John 4:19) by: Having personal and family Bible study, worship, and prayer (Dt. 6:4-9), Being a witness for Christ to friends, family and acquaintances (Acts 1:8), Walking Righteously (Proverbs 4:23-27), Being exemplary in our behavior (I Peter 2:12), and Avoiding the appearance of evil (I thessalonians 5:22).

Finally if God removes us from this assembly, we commit to unite as soon as possible with another church where we can carry out the spirit of this covenant. Amen.

Chapter 9

Peacemaking and Corrective Church Discipline

Lois Barrett, in her excellent book, *Building the House Church*, notes four phases in the development of a house church; honeymoon, conflict, love, mission. Our experience bears this out. In order for a true church reflecting God's covenantal love to be born, the church members must learn how to work through conflict to get to love which ultimately finds its expression in mission. Thus peacemaking skills are a high priority in learning how to become a living, loving community.

Fortunately, principles of retaining and restoring relationships abound throughout the New Testament. Most of these go back to Jesus teaching on peacemaking in Matthew 18. When a person has been injured by another member of the church a series of steps needs to occur to bring about restoration in the relationship. We have summarized these below in what we call a covenant of Forgiveness. If these steps do not bring about the necessary reconciliation, corrective church discipline is required. The second section of this chapter deals with this. Due to the tremendous misunderstandings and abuse of discipline this chapter is quite extensive and carefully outlined.

I. PEACEMAKING: EXERCISING THE COVENANT OF FORGIVENESS

In a fallen world of sinful men, relationships need to be sustained through emphasizing what we call the Covenant of Forgiveness based on Matthew 18:10-34. The following summarizes how this covenant is exercised. Regularly practiced, it will lead to constructive resolution of conflict in the home and the church.

1. The covenant defined:

Forgiveness is a promise and thus falls under the category of a covenant. The covenant of forgiveness is practiced between two parties: a villain (the one causing the hurt through sin) and the victim (the one absorbing the pain). Forgiveness is a gracious act (it cannot be forced and is not owed) on the part of the victim toward the villain and is a threefold promise on the part of the victim:

- A. The victim promises not to throw up the crime in the face of the villain in the future.
- B. The victim promises not to talk further about the crime to others. In this case the victim would become the villain.
- C. The victim promises not to rehearse the incident over and over again in his/her mind "nursing the grudge". This may be the most difficult for someone in this habit. 2 Cor 10:3-5 and Phil. 4:8 show this is possible, although it may take some practice.

2. The covenant exercised:

The Covenant of forgiveness follows the guidelines in Matthew 18:15-21 and 5:23-24. The following example applies it to a marriage relationship. The situation will be that the husband is the villain and his wife the victim. The same scenario would apply to problems between children and parents, members of the body, etc.

The husband has come home late for dinner for the 5th night in a row. Dinner is spoiled, and the wife is in deep distress. The covenant of forgiveness would follow the following steps.

A. In the likely event that the villain does not know that he is the villain, the victim needs to approach the villain in love. She first removes the logs from her own eye and seeks the good of the villain. (It works better if the villain figures out he is the villain before the victim needs to tell him. But that is no excuse for the victim to nurse the grudge and not approach the villain). If the villain is in a position of authority over the victim (as in the case of a child) the victim needs to approach the villain with respect (I Timothy 5:1-5).

B. The Villain, hopefully, sees his villainy from this revelatory experience and takes full responsibility for his crime. There is no place for blameshifting, or excusing his actions based on the sin of another. **THERE IS NO EXCUSE FOR SIN!** We are responsible to act righteously and also **REACT** righteously (Cf. Romans 12:17-21). If the villain refuses the light, or excuses or justifies the action, the relationship suffers. In many cases it is necessary to take the next steps in Mt. 18. At any rate, the restitution will be more extensive when the villain does come to repentance. The villain, with humility, says "I WAS WRONG FOR....." NOT "I am sorry". His sorrow or lack of it is not the point, but rather a judgement upon his actions/attitudes. Confession is agreeing with the judge on the judgement. The victim needs to hear this agreement.

C. When the villain sees his crime and takes responsibility for it he also lets the victim cross examine him in order to test the genuineness of the repentance (this is part of restitution). For instance, suppose the wife reproves the husband for his lateness in coming home for dinner. He immediately says "I was wrong for coming home late". But as he has done this 4 nights in a row, she presses him further asking if he understands the disruption and pain it causes her when he does this. At this point she is appealing for a repentance of attitude, not simply words. The villain will submit to this if he is humbly repentant and desires to grow through this experience.

D. After submitting to the cross examination and seeing the sincerity of the repentance, the victim, filled with the Holy Spirit and in full knowledge of the great forgiveness God has granted to her, says: "I FORGIVE YOU", this making the covenant with all the above promises. In the process she absorbs the penalty for the crime.

E. The Villain then seeks from the Lord what restitution is required on his part. In this case he might suggest that if he is going to be more than 15 minutes late, he will find a

phone and call his wife. He will do this as soon as it is apparent that he will be late, and not put it off to the last moment.

The result of the covenant of forgiveness should be reconciliation, that is, a restored relationship. It must be practiced often in marriage and in the home by all parties, since there will be many opportunities to sin. Failure to be reconciled (even if not in this exact form) results in resentment, bitterness, and fragmentation in the relationships of the family and the church. Without the regular exercise of this covenant of forgiveness, it will be difficult to take further steps for correction often referred to as church discipline.

II. CORRECTIVE CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Due to the tremendous misunderstanding, neglect, misuse and abuse of discipline within Christendom we will look at this subject at length.

Corrective church discipline refers to action taken by an assembly or member of an assembly to maintain the purity and love of that community. In Matthew 18:15-21 Jesus lists the steps for corrective discipline. First one member approaches another brother or sister. Then he brings another witness. Finally, the church excludes an unrepentant brother or sister. Every step of the above is church discipline. Excluding the member is merely the final step done when the erring brother refuses to listen. It is done for the restoration of the brother and maintain the purity of the body.

1. WHY CHURCHES FAIL TO EXERCISE CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE

Many churches throughout the world today fail to carry out their responsibilities regarding church discipline. These churches ignore the clear instructions given in God's Word on this topic. There are many reasons why this is so:

A. Some Are Apathetic - They do not shepherd their sheep and therefore are unaware of habitual sin that may enter into the life of one or more of its members. In fact, some churches are so lax in the area of shepherding, that they do not know who is a member and who is not a member. Sheep wander in and out like a revolving door. The shepherds of these flocks need to be sobered up to the fact that they will give an account before God for their respective flocks. (I Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:28-31)

B. Some Believe It Is "Unloving" - They believe the church is to be "all loving" and therefore never "judge" a brother or a sister. They feel their responsibility is to keep a "loving arm" around the members at all times and eventually God will bring them around. This type of thinking distorts the biblical definition of love. For Godly love does not allow a wayward brother or sister to continue on in their sin. God does not allow for this and neither should the church. (I John 3:6-9; I Cor. 5:12-13; Galatians 6:1)

C. Some Believe It Is "Harsh" - It is a cruel thing to confront someone about their sin. After all doesn't the Bible say "He who is without sin, cast the first stone...?" Doesn't

this tell us not to confront others about their sin? Even in the above mentioned passage this is not the case. For Jesus himself went on to tell the woman caught in adultery; "Go now and leave your life of sin." Though confronting someone about their sin may be a difficult thing to do, it certainly instructs us to approach our brother when he is caught in a sin for the purpose of helping him, not hurting him. (Matthew 18:15; Matthew 7:3-5; Galatians 6:1)

D. Some Fail To Discipline Out Of Fear - What will the other members of the church think of such action? If some don't like this they may leave or divide the church. Why rock the boat? This thinking is erroneous and a compromise to the Scriptures. In fact, failure to discipline will do more harm to the church than good. Christ himself rebukes the church of Thyatira for not disciplining as it should have (Rev. 2:20-21). The apostle Paul also refutes this type of thinking; reminding the Corinthians that a little sin will eventually infect the whole church (I Cor. 5:6-8).

E. Some Fail To Discipline Because Of Unbelief - They think they know better than God how to handle the matter. Putting a person out of the assembly and shunning the ones who have sinned is not the answer. They know a better way, a more "loving," "gentle" way to deal with the problem. Yet, Proverbs 3:5-6 clearly teaches us to trust God in everything. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. He is the one who knows the best way to deal with His children. It is therefore our responsibility to believe Him and trust Him even in the matters that seem difficult for us.

F. Some Discipline Behind Closed Doors - Some churches attempt to discipline wayward members, but not bring it before the church. They feel that the "leaders" need to handle these matters and that the church is not "mature" enough to handle such things. Matters like this will only upset them and confuse them. Unfortunately, a church misses out on many blessings by adhering to this type of thinking. The church at Jerusalem was struck with fear and learned a tremendous lesson through the discipline of Annanias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). God will use church discipline to not only sanctify the wayward believer, but also to purify the church.

2. Discipline Defined and Supported

A. Definitions

a. Church discipline has been defined as: "The due exercise of that authority and power which the Lord Christ, in and by His Word, hath granted unto the church, for its continuance, increase and preservation in purity, order and holiness according to His appointment." (John Owen)

b. By church discipline we are referring to any action taken by an assembly or member of an assembly to maintain the purity and love of that community. Church discipline therefore, takes place constantly in the life of a church. Excluding the member is merely the final step.

B. Scriptural Background and Support

a. Old Testament Examples

- i. Exodus 32:19-35 - Israelites were disciplined because of idolatry
- ii. Leviticus 10:1-3 - Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, slain for offering "unauthorized fire"
- iii. Numbers 16:1-35 - Korah disciplined for rebellion
- iv. I Cor. 10:1-13 - These things occurred as examples and warnings for us.

b. Christ himself sanctioned church discipline. (Matthew 18:15-20) In fact He became angry with a church for its failure to exercise discipline. (Revelation 2:20-21)

c. The Apostle Paul condoned the practice and gave instruction on the topic on numerous occasions. (I Cor. 5:4-5,11; I Tim. 1:19-20; Titus 3:10; Rom. 16:17; I Tim. 5:19-20)

3. Purpose Of Church Discipline (1)

Biblical discipline is an expression of love. Therefore it can never be contrasted with love (e.g. by asking, "should we show love or should we exercise discipline?") The biblical opposite of discipline is neglect, which is an expression of hatred. Therefore, the most unloving thing a church can do is "nothing." Neglect of a wayward believer will undoubtedly bring about his demise and perhaps the destruction of the church.

"He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him."
Proverbs 13:24

"The Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son...If you are not disciplined...then you are illegitimate children and not true sons."
Hebrews 12:6-8

Biblical discipline does not include harshness, provoking the offending party to anger or acting out of personal irritation. Nor is it to be used by church leadership to suppress opposition or differing viewpoints. (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:19,21)

4. Results Of Church Discipline

When a church carries out discipline as it ought, it will bring about the following results:

A. Safeguards Purity In The Church - Our God is a Holy God who has called a people to Himself to be holy, blameless, without stain or wrinkle (I Cor. 5:6-7; I Peter 1:16; Eph. 5:27). Removing the little bit of leaven ensures that the church will remain pure as God wants her to be. In fact, some in the church of Corinth were put to death by

God for coming to the table of the Lord in an unworthy manner. If the church will not take steps to ensure purity, God will take matters into His own hands (I Cor. 11:27-32).

B. Sets An Example For The Other Members: When Annanias and Sapphira were struck down by God for their lying, "fear seized all who heard what had happened" (Acts 5:5). Salvation by grace was not a license to sin. In fact, the forgiven sinner has a greater responsibility to live a holy life by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6:9-13). When one of the members is disciplined by God, it is a sobering reminder to the others of their responsibility as children of God (I Peter 1:15-16). An Elder who is disciplined also serves as a warning to the rest of the assembly (I Tim. 5:19-20).

C. Safeguards The Testimony/Reputation Of The Church - The Church is to be a light in a dark world. It is to be an example and witness of the Lord Jesus Christ to the lost. If we allow sin to enter in and remain, we become ineffective and useless in our efforts. In fact, certain radio and television "ministries" have made a mockery out of the Gospel due to their conduct. Great shame has come upon the church because of such action. Therefore, the church must protect its testimony by dealing with such matters swiftly and completely. (Mt. 5:13-16; I Cor. 5:1,13; I Tim. 4:16)

D. Brings The Offending Party To Repentance And Restoration The goal of church discipline is to bring the wayward member back to a place of fruitfulness for God. When the offending party is removed from the church he loses the protection and care of the body as well as the privilege of fellowship and the Lord's Supper. The hope here is to bring a sense of loss and pain to the person so that he will repent of his ways and be restored. Such a person must repent of the sin(s) that led to his dismissal before restoration can occur. Fruit of a changed heart must be visible. This will call for proper restitution to be made. The congregation must then forgive and receive back the one who confesses and renounces his sin. (Pr. 28:13; Mt. 7:16-20; Lk. 3:8; Lk. 17:3-4; Acts 26:20)

5. Reasons For Church Discipline

Over the ages there has been much debate over what sins merit church discipline. Certainly, some areas are open to question while others seem quite clear according to the Scriptures. Therefore, the discussion in this paper will be restricted to those passages in the Bible which give clear and specific teaching. The passages list those sins, which when practiced, characterize the unregenerate or unbelievers. There is a stiff warning associated to those who continue in these sins.

A. I Cor. 5:11-13: "But now I am writing that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside. Expel the wicked man from among you."

B. I Cor. 6:9-10: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. C. Galatians 5:19-21: "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

D. Ephesians 5:3-7: " But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person - such a man is an idolater - has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them."

E. Revelations 21:8: "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars, their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

F. Revelations 22:15: "Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood."

6. Implementing Church Discipline

A. Steps of church discipline

a. Scripture Matthew 18: 15-18: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."

b. The steps involve*

- i. One on One shepherding
- ii. Take two or three for additional witnesses and to give confirmation and warning
- iii. Tell it to the church
- iv. Expulsion and handing the person over to Satan

* - Each step is to be handled carefully and prayerfully. Each case is unique and should be handled on its own merits. The goal is to bring repentance and restoration.

The church's responsibility is to call the person back to his savior, then to forgive and receive back the repentant one.

B. Response of the Church (2) The response of the church depends on the response of the disciplined individual.

a. A person who is disciplined and leaves the assembly - Such a person must be treated as an outsider or an unbeliever (Mt. 18:17). This person should lose all the benefits of being in the body. Such a person does not have true fellowship with God, and therefore should not have the privilege of enjoying fellowship with God's people (I John 1:6-7). The only contact with these individuals should be for the purpose of bringing them to repentance. However, if the person becomes factious and divisive, there should be no contact with them to protect the flock (Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10-11). The offending party must repent and show evidence of repentance prior to being restored to the body (Luke 3:8).

b. A person who is disciplined but who does not want to leave the assembly - This is a "so called brother." A person who does not want to repent of his sin, yet retain the privileges of God's people. Such a person is dangerous, since they represent "old yeast." This person can infect the entire assembly if left unchecked. The Bible tells us to remove the "old yeast," that we may be a new batch without yeast (I Cor. 5:6-7). The Lord instructs an assembly to treat very severely someone who maintains their sin and at the same time professes to be a "brother." He is to be expelled from the church. With such a man we are not even to eat (I Cor. 5:11-13). He should be put out for the protection of the purity of the church and to protect the testimony of the church. In fact, Paul instructs the church to hand such a man over to Satan, so that his flesh may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord (I Cor. 5:5, I Tim. 1:20). The hope is for God to deal with the offender in such a way so as to bring him back to repentance.

c. A person who is under discipline for being unruly In some cases, an assembly may need to censure the behavior of a brother or sister. If such a person is unruly or living a disorderly life, he is not to be associated with. The purpose of this was so that the offending party might feel shame and come to his senses. He was not to be expelled from the church like the sinning brother referred to in I Cor. 5. The offense here is not as flagrant and therefore does not call for expulsion from the church. If this discipline proves ineffective, ultimate church discipline could then follow. (II Thessalonians 3:6-15)

d. Discipline of Non-Members - In some cases it is appropriate to discipline non-members. A "so-called brother" who disrupts an assembly by his conduct or teaching may be "marked out" for the protection of the church. Such a person does not have to be an "official" member of the church to be marked out. Regular attenders, who may not have committed themselves to the assembly fall into this category. It may also be appropriate to "mark out" some radio preachers, T.V. evangelists or self-proclaimed teachers. The discipline here is geared more for the

protection of the flock. False teachers and divisive people are to be avoided.
(Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:10-11)

7. Problems That Short Circuit The Effects of Discipline

A. A church fails to persevere in discipline - The church "caves in" and allows the offender back prior to their fully repenting and making proper restitution (Acts 26:20). They begin to question whether or not they have done the right thing and fail to allow the discipline to have its full effect on the person's life.

B. Churches fail to cooperate with other sister churches - A member who is disciplined from one church is gladly received in another church prior to the person repenting. They fail to look into the background of the new-member and find out why they left their prior assembly. I recommend that the elders require letters of commendation or at least make a telephone call to the prior church before receiving transferring members.

C. Relationships in the body are not strong enough to affect the offending member - Perhaps that person was never fully integrated or shepherded into the life of the assembly. In such cases the discipline will not be as powerful. The person will not sense a great loss of fellowship since they never had such fellowship to begin with.

D. Certain members don't stand firm in the discipline Although the church as a whole stands firm, certain members refuse to stand by the discipline. They continue to fellowship with the offending person and therefore do not allow the discipline to take its full affect. In cases like this, the members who rebel against the discipline must also be warned. If they do not cooperate, discipline may also need to be administered against them.

The members of the church need to be taught that discipline should always be motivated by love--for their savior and for the erring member. Love and discipline should never appear in opposition. The house church will need to learn the "tough love" of our heavenly Father in this area. Churches that do not discipline are more like christian clubs than living communities.

Chapter 10

Meetings Of The House Church

As we move from the gathering stage into the covenanting stage normally we have to add another meeting. We must be conscious of the purpose of meetings, lest we exhaust the people by becoming meeting oriented. We have found it helpful to distinguish between three different types of meetings: Gathering Meetings, Community Meetings, Ministry Meetings. Simply adding meetings may cripple the house church's ability to reproduce and even cause it to crystalize. For this reason we must regularly evaluate our use of meetings.

For example, several of our churches started from gathering meetings. But once we made a transition into the covenanting stage, we stopped the gathering meetings. In one case we added a Sunday community meeting and retained a mid-week meeting (which formally was the gathering meeting). Both meetings focused on writing the covenant. The Sunday morning meeting was for worship and teaching about the Biblical basis of covenanting (usually focusing on the "one another" verses of the New Testament). The mid-week meeting was for the actual prayerful writing of the covenant. Without on-going gathering meetings, evangelistic efforts declined, with a deceleration in church reproduction. Months later when we tried to restart evangelistic efforts, the results were sluggish. The church had crystallized into a self-centered group of naval gazers. (More about dangers of ending gathering meetings later.)

To combat this, we clarified the following purposes for meetings.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

We call Sunday meetings the COMMUNITY MEETING. The community may meet on another day, due to peoples' schedules, but a Sunday meeting is traditional in the west. Often this meeting has two parts: worship and teaching. The Lord's table is often a part of the worship and teaching is on issues relevant to the community. We prepare reading schedules for daily use in the homes. Thus even if a "teaching" does not occur at the community meeting on a particular week, the congregation is learning together through discussion of Scripture in the home. The reading schedule contains a passage of Scripture for each day with a question to start discussion. We encourage interaction by discussing the text first in the home and then at the community meeting. In the home, discussion usually lasts for 3-5 minutes, at a meal or bedtime. Reading lists are for 5 or 7 days each week.

The reading schedules are developed by the leaders or church planters as they are needed in the church. As churches reproduce, a pool of reading schedules accumulates and can be revised as needed.

Reading schedules must deal with the needs and opportunities of the church community. For instance, in one house church several people had been saved out of cults. The leader decided to use Galatians to teach the basics of the gospel. He developed a 10 week

reading schedule with Galatians as the backbone, with other related passages. Each man in the community took turns leading the discussion week by week, including those who had covenanted out of a cult background. The results were excellent.

Other reading schedules we have found useful include the "one another" verses of the Bible, developing Christian relationships (I John), Principles for the Healing of Souls (Romans 3-8), Unity and Conflict, Studies in the life of Jesus (a Harmony of the Gospels), Kingdom Living (Matthew), etc. Most last 8-12 weeks. Longer reading schedules get bogged down because the needs of the community change quickly. A list of Reading Schedules is available through the Fellowship of Church Planting Teams (address at the front of the manual). At the covenanting stage, we use reading schedules focusing on the church often from Acts or Ephesians.

Although teaching and worship normally make up the meeting, special aspects of edification may take the place of the teaching and/or worship, such as:

prayer: although this occurs in worship, it may be appropriate to set a whole meeting aside for prayer and intercession during times of crisis.

decision making: see chapter 3 on Developing a Covenant. planning for the future: See Stage 3, Vision Statements. evaluation of community health: we look at our vision statement and evaluate our progress. New ideas can be put forward to help us fulfill God's plan for us. Some meetings may focus on conflict and conflict resolution.

covenanting: when a new community comes into existence we have a feast along with public signing of the covenant. Other churches may be invited to pray for the new church.

receiving new members: New members covenant with the church. See Covenanting Ceremony in Appendix 14.

baptisms: Baptisms are usually performed as part of the community meetings although they can be part of gathering. After the evangelist baptizes the first group, those who have been baptized normally baptize their new converts under supervision of elders or church planters.

affirmation meetings: The members are encouraged to affirm verbally other members in their gifts and ministries through which they have experienced blessing. These meetings are usually tremendously uplifting. The members are encouraged to focus on one another, NOT on the evangelist!

church discipline. Special community meetings are for members only and may be prefaced with much prayer, fasting, and instruction on church discipline. (See Stage 3, Chapter 18).

The COMMUNITY MEETING should vary from week to week and not stagnate into one rote pattern. The community meeting should help the group develop into community. Community meetings are for believers, although seekers may often come.

GATHERING MEETINGS

It is a mistake to end gathering meetings when the group covenants. In many cases new social circles are still being penetrated, and old ones have not yet been fully explored to take captive for the Kingdom each member of the social circle. It ought to be the norm for a church to have a single community meeting but several small gathering meetings led by different members.

These gathering meetings ought to run for a specified duration with a specific topic. For example: 8 studies on the Kingdom from Matthew, 6 studies on Kingdom living from the sermon on the mount, 8 studies from Acts on the growth of the Kingdom, etc. Gathering meetings are for unbelievers and thus only those believers who bring their unbelieving friends should come.

Other types of topical Bible studies can be used for gathering as well. Anything that can gather unbelievers and convey the gospel should be considered. Some examples: Biblical Principles of Child Rearing, Biblical Principles for a Healthy Marriage Relationship, Principles for the Healing of Souls, How to be a Man (Women, Teenager), Financial Help in a Crumbling World.

Anything that can draw the lost and make the GOSPEL good news is fair game. We need to communicate the good news and not simply wise advice from the Bible. This requires constantly finding ways to make the Gospel relevant to the fallen world, as Jesus himself did. Remember, gathering meetings are for unbelievers. They should feel comfortable at these meetings! Community meetings are for the believers to feel comfortable. I have run many gathering meetings where the people there have been quite permissuious and crass and which would make most believers uncomfortable. Likewise a gathering meeting where the leader starts with a legnthly prayer is likely to make unbelievers and visitors uncomfortable. Gatherers will have to be flexible. Remember, Jesus partied at Matthew's and Zaccheus' homes.

MINISTRY MEETINGS

MINISTRY MEETINGS, like community meetings, are for believers. These normally occur in mid-week, to enable the congregation to minister more effectively. Neither a gathering meeting nor a ministry meeting is for the WHOLE CHURCH. Each member should prayerfully consider how God wants him/her to serve. Some may attend neither gathering or ministry meetings, but do other types of service. As the churches multiply and form networks of cooperating churches, some of these Ministry meetings may include members of other churches. For instance, a group of parents might want to study parenting. Others might want to organize for working on music or drama for a fellowship meeting or an evangelistic effort. Men and women will meet occasionally for special

leadership training and prayer. Ministry Meetings for prayer should be ongoing. Mid-week meetings should be for a specific purpose, last for a specified period, and be evaluated at the close by those who attended, for effectiveness.

We have found it very important to avoid having meeting-centered churches. People get exhausted by meetings which produce nothing except "program maintenance". We have found one community meeting per week of the church, with multiple, decentralized ministry and gathering meetings is the most effective way to reproduce. This increases flexibility and helps avoid crystallization, so the churches can move forward as God's Spirit leads.

FELLOWSHIP MEETINGS

Our house churches cluster in fellowships of from 2 to 6 house churches. The individual churches in a fellowship will normally meet together about once a month. It is a good time of celebration, sharing of testimonies, worship, and keeping up old relationships. Fellowship meetings are an encouragement to those house churches going through difficult times. They are also times when a house church and especially new members can realize that God's work is bigger than any house church. They are also excellent times to hear mission reports from teams operating in the regions beyond.

Chapter 11 STAGE 3: REPRODUCTION (Reproducing Children)

GOAL: Start a new church or two.

PROJECT: Develop and implement a vision statement sealing God's will for the church over the next 6 months. This vision statement should be in two parts: a plan for evangelism by the believers, and a plan for edification which is the responsibility of the church planter and the initial leaders (Eph 4:12). These two ministries are related. Edification includes equipping the congregation to reproduce (disciples, leaders, and other congregations). The vision should have measurable goals which can be evaluated periodically over the 6 month period by "health checks".

ACTIVITIES: A new church's first vision statement will be fairly simple. When it reproduces, it draws up a new, more complex vision statement. We will focus now on a new church's vision statement. The Vision Statement includes evangelism and edification. The church planter works on the edification part, the congregation on the evangelism part of the statement. It should envision the next 6 months measurably and realistically. Several things should be included:

1. Teaching on leadership for the community meetings. Home reading schedules are provided with Bible verses corresponding to the activities in the vision statement. The church is equipped by God's Word at once to embrace and implement the vision. Heads of families need to be encouraged and equipped to continue the training in their homes through this daily Bible reading. The men continue to lead the community meeting on a rotating basis.
2. Appoint the first provisional leaders. These work with the church planter to implement the edification activities of the vision statement. In the process they learn how to work within a leadership team. These shepherd's-in-training should be appointed as soon as possible since they set the pace for the other believers. This uncovers potential, but shy leaders, as well as proud, would-be leaders who need to learn patience. Be prepared to bring those who desire leadership for carnal motives to a place of repentance. Also be prepared to deal with the initial pride which may come out in newly appointed leaders. A focus on the leader's home life and humility and may be helpful.

If there are two itinerant church planters still involved, one should definitely phase out of the community meetings and start other gathering meetings. He may exploit the social circles of those in the new church or find totally new contacts. Each member of the church should continue to evangelize their own social circles. They can also help the second church planter to find new contacts outside of their social circle, visiting them with the church planter. If there is no second church planter, the church planter heading up the new church should train one or two men for evangelism of new social circles and to lead the resulting gathering meetings. These men may be the core of a new church planting team.

As soon as the provisional leaders show themselves to be faithful men, the church planter ordains them as elders. He then moves on and serves as a coach outside of the church for these new elders. Elder appointment normally occurs at the end of the REPRODUCTION stage and serves to send off the church planter to start a new church. At least one church planter remains nearby to train the elders until they are able to raise up new churches and elders without his help.

3. "Discipleship chains" are set up around the new leaders and new believers coming into the fellowship. "Single link chains" all linked to one church planter are a recipe for destruction. Multiple link chains must be set up around one or more of the provisional leaders or elders. All new believers should be discipled by the ones who bring them in, who are coached by the elders.

4. As events develop, the leadership team discerns how the Lord desires the church to reproduce. Two common ways are: a. Grow until the group must divide in two. Our experience shows that a group should make plans to divide when it approaches 12 covenant members (excluding children--covenanted teens are considered adults and expected to serve as such). This is the most difficult way for a group to reproduce since it traumatizes the entire group. Often it leads to slow reproduction since it takes time for both groups to reorient themselves. However, if the group does grow and refuses to reproduce, it will become ingrown and exclusive and not be of much value to God for extending His Kingdom.

b. Reproduction through penetration of social circles in the group. This will normally happen in one of two ways:

(i). A person who has contacts in the area gets saved and comes to the church. He begins to evangelize and gather these contacts to hear the gospel. If he needs help either the church planter, (the gatherer) or a man being trained by the church planter goes and helpd with the gathering meeting. The new believer often may need to be challenged and helped to do a lot of the work himself. This will especially be true if the work grows rapidly. Remember: God uses consecrated inadequate vessels all the time. As this gathering group develops it also starts community meetings and covenants. During its "covenanting" stage it will probably have much contact with its "mother" church.

(ii). New ground is broken by the "gathering" church planter. He should be helped by someone from newly covenanted church from which he has left. When gathering meetings start and develop into a church, it already has a relationship with a "mother" house church with which to form a fellowship or network of house churches. Be continually on the lookout for perspective church planters. Don't presume it will take a long time for these to be developed.

5. Finally, as a new church comes into existence, begin networking the churches together so that the older leaders help the newer leaders, and the resources of one church can help the other. (See Chapter 13) Our Fellowships of house churches meet monthly for a time

of worship and united celebration. Each house church is autonomous, but not independent, since all are in fellowship with each other. Decisions which may affect other house churches are brought to the Fellowship Overseer Board for prayer and consultation. Some events may be organized for all the churches' participation, to further edify the saints or reach the lost. But the Fellowship itself remains loosely organized. Once there are five or six house churches in the fellowship, new fellowships are encouraged to begin as new churches are formed.

Chapter 12

DYNAMICS OF LEADERSHIP IN HOUSE CHURCHES

As the Fellowship of Church Planters has seen house churches emerge over the past years, we have had to evolve a new model of leadership quite distinct from those with which we were familiar in traditional church structures. In order for the house church model to survive, there are fundamental structural changes that need to be made in our idea of church leaders and their development.

It would be helpful to mention four levels of identity that Christians in house churches experience. The first and primary identity is the church as it gathers in small groupings usually in the home. The second identity is a network of these house gatherings meeting together, whether these are independent house churches or home "cell groups" of one church. The third identity is a network of multiple congregations gathering together. The last identity is the universal world-wide church. In this paper we will examine leadership in the primary identity of the church, as she gathers together for worship in the home. To get an understanding of the place and method of leadership in the house church, we need to review what the church is as it meets in the home. How leadership functions follows this understanding.

THE CHURCH AS A FUNCTIONING PEOPLE

The N.T. depicts the church as a Christian community made up of "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9). One of the essential features of this community is the corporate nature of its people. God chooses and makes covenant not with individual people but with "a people" corporately who would bear His name and would exist for His purposes. Although the community is entered into individually by faith in Jesus Christ, it is nonetheless the corporate church that is God's concern for us in Christ.

We are corporately the church, "the called out ones", joined together in common fellowship under the New Covenant, with the Lordship of Christ Himself who is the Head of the church. Because He is Head of His church, all other parts of the newly constituted body of Christ function as parts of that body both sustained by Christ and growing up into Him (Eph. 4:11-16). In these verses, the Apostle Paul lays the foundation for body ministry. Paul states that the church has received gifts of "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers", who have been gifted by God to "equip the saints for the work of the ministry". As the body is equipped for service, its members in turn have the responsibility of ministry to one another. (A study of the one another's in the New Testament, examining who they are written to, would prove helpful).

Within this functional structure of active body ministry, we all, as members of the body, are responsible to function as ministers and priests. All members of the body are gifted to minister within the capacity of their calling. By its very nature, the house church model fosters an atmosphere that affords every member--man, woman, and child-- ample opportunity to find his or her own niche in Christianity and minister within those

boundaries. It is as every member of that body supplies their unique ministry that the body is able to see and experience the fullness of what is involved in being the earthly body of the living Christ. Because of the size of the house church, it is necessary to employ everyone. Therefore, this model of church is completely participatory.

LEADERSHIP

Although the house church has no professional "clergy", the church still does have identifiable leadership. Their primary functions are nurture and direction. Leadership is viewed as being an equal part of the church body, gifted to perform a certain function necessary for the proper health and growth of the body. Leadership in the New Testament is never seen as outside of or above the people themselves, but simply as a part of the whole, essential in their calling to the health and well being of the body, but also governed by the same set of rules. Their gifts are part of the Spirit's work among the whole people. Because of their sense of corporate life as the family of God, the New Testament leaders did not consider themselves "ordained" to lead the people, but "gifted" to do so as one of many gifts of the body. The emphasis was not on their ordination (especially seen as dictatorial authority) but on their responsibilities within the body. In Eph. 4 we see the leadership preparing and equipping the church for the work of the ministry of serving one another. So we see leadership not acting separate from or over the body but as functioning within the body fulfilling that which they have been called to do.

As leadership emerges in house churches, we must again turn to the New Testament to determine the shape of the leadership structure in the earliest congregations. The foundation of church and church leadership is laid by Christ Himself and the apostles and prophets whom He chose and instructed (Eph. 2:20). We face many practical difficulties in church life, however, simply because of a lack of specific Biblical instruction. There is no "cookie cutter" pattern given in scripture which to model the church. Each local church therefore has latitude in its particular conviction concerning church government, as long as they are within the clear commands and principles found in the New Testament.

In dealing with leadership, the apostles were more concerned with the character and life of the men they put into leadership than they were about some abstract church principles of church governance. What we do see is two kinds of leadership emerging. On the one hand, we see itinerant teachers, such as Paul, who founded churches and exercised leadership in those churches until leaders were recognized, trained, and put in place. His sphere of influence was extra-local and temporary. On the other hand, we see local leadership in the hands of elders, which in every case in the New Testament is in the plural. Their sphere of influence was local and permanent.

The issue of elder's authority at the local level seems to have generated very little interest. Attention is focused not on their "authority", but on their role as those who cared for others. Leaders were basically responsible for all that was involved in nurturing the flock. Church government and authority was exercised by the church as a whole (Mt 18:15-20), with the oversight of the elders. In Mark 10:42-45, Christ's idea of leadership was

totally foreign to the thinking of the world and to the religious leadership of His day. Nonetheless, Christ indisputably teaches that leaders will not assume a lordship role or have authority over His sheep. Where then does the authority exist?

Christ answers this question clearly when He stated, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me". (Matt. 28:18; see also Eph. 5:24). Christ is the authority in the church. Christ teaches in Mt. 23:8, "You have one Master, and you are all brothers". Here Jesus not only describes His role in the church ("Master") but also teaches the role of the body ("you are all brothers"). He is describing the equality and family affection which should exist among all believers. Our attention is to be focused on the real issue--the relationships that are created in the New Covenant, relationships that involve servanthood and humility among a brotherhood of equals in the church. With this in mind, authority residing in the church rather than in the elder begins to become clear. Elders are seen as the leading servants (not servant leaders!). The scripture emphasizes the importance of leaders' fulfilling their God given responsibilities. In I Cor. 16:16, we see men who were fulfilling their responsibilities of servanthood, "they had devoted themselves to the service of the saints". Paul says these men are deserving of your respect or submission. Paul does not command them to respect but "urges" them to respect them because of their labor among the church (i.e., the carrying out of their responsibilities). We also learn that respect is due to "everyone who joins in the work, and labors at it". Respect is for all who labor whether designated as leaders or not. Respect has to be earned by fulfilling their responsibilities of leadership. In I Thess. 5:12,13 Paul again urges the body to respect the labors among them because they are fulfilling their responsibilities. Authority is granted as respect (submission) is given. Respect is given as responsibility is fulfilled. Respect dictates and allows authority; authority does not dictate respect. Respect is something that must be earned as a shepherd labors among the flock. Authority is granted to those who earn the respect of their people because of fulfilling their responsibilities. As a shepherd of the flock assumes and fulfills his responsibilities, the respect of the flock can be expected--followed by a willingness to grant "authority" over their lives to the leadership. Authority can never be forced on the flock by an authoritarian leadership without going contrary to Christ's teaching. As responsibilities are fulfilled, respect is earned (Heb. 13:7), and then the flock is willing to "obey and submit to their spiritual oversight" (Heb.13:17). The nature of small groups requires that the group be more committed to the body than to the leader. This requirement is necessary to insure the survival of the group. No matter what happens to the leader, the group will probably not die, especially if the reproductive principles of 2 Tim.2:2 are being followed. If the group is committed to living out sound biblical teaching in the body rather than to the leader, then if a teacher begins to stray from the truth of the Bible, the group can detect and correct the error. A benefit of these house churches being tied closely into a network of churches is that the chance of a single house church following the bizarre teaching of a leader is lessened considerably.

The use of so-called lay persons at various levels of leadership and spiritual development of membership have helped to recover an atmosphere reminiscent of the early church. Because the house church creates an atmosphere that resembles family, the leadership should also resemble family. Because of the closeness of the group, the intimacy of

relationships and the frequency of meeting, each family member is able to see, close-up and first hand, the life of each other member. As those whom God has called to lead begin to emerge, the group is able to see the man in his life and observe his character. They are able to see his reactions to the difficult every day family situations. As we know, no one knows us better than our own family. There are no masks or walls to hide behind. Because of the exposure of more facets of the life and character of the man, the group can better assess him, in accordance with the Biblical principles of leadership in I Tim 3 and Titus 1.

Governance in the New Testament house churches as well as contemporary house churches, is a combination of body control and elder leadership. The body is responsible for decision making, active ministry, shepherding, corporate worship, discipleship, and evangelism. The elders are responsible for leading, vision (although not necessarily exclusively within recognized leadership), oversight, nurture, teaching (not exclusively within recognized leadership), and training.

As we have noted, the New Testament gives no "cookie cutter" pattern for producing churches. The Lord has divinely chosen to allow each individual church to decide its own government by which it will operate as long as it is based on biblical principles and commands. Most generally, churches need a basic, biblical church government that will serve each individual church's needs. If we have come to a local church where we can, with a clean conscience, function to the capacity that God has called us, we have come to the church where God wants us. Chapter 13 Networking Leaders

Leaders of nearby house churches must network together for strength and stability. House churches are Vibrant, Versatile, but also Volatile. Our house church fellowships have the leaders of each house church meet regularly in what they call a Fellowship Overseer Board. This is set up for this as soon as a house church reproduces since then there are two sets of leaders from autonomous churches. Any church planters working in the fellowship can serve with the FOB but should not take any formal position on the board (eg. Moderator, clerk, etc.).

Each leader in the house church is expected to be working to reproduce himself for new churches which will be formed. He does this by continually mentoring at least one potential leader in his house church. These new leaders join the Fellowship Overseer Board as new churches come into existence. As a result, each new member of the board will have been personally mentored by another FOB member. The goal is to assure quality leadership through relationships with more mature leaders. This paper outlines how one of our Fellowship Overseer Boards functions.

I. Introduction

A fellowship of house churches is a network of from 2 to 6 house churches which desire to be in fellowship with one another. They express that desire formally (normally through their house church covenant). Churches outside the fellowship can join the East Providence Fellowship of House Churches by making the request to the Fellowship

Overseer Board. After consulting with each of the churches in the Fellowship, the outside church may be accepted into the East Providence Fellowship of House Churches.

The leaders of each house church meet together monthly on a board known as the Fellowship Overseers Board. This paper explores the interaction of leaders in the house church fellowship. There are two extremes of leader interaction, both of which we reject:

1. The leaders are seen as leading each particular house church and have no accountability to each other. Any interaction would then be voluntary. The FOB could meet for prayer, mutual encouragement, counsel, etc. But there would be no binding decisions or accountability among them. They would be solely responsible for the house church of which they are the leaders. In this scenario the house church is seen as completely independent. It needs no help in accomplishing the task God has given to it and has all the resources necessary. We believe that this is not a healthy or Biblical definition of the church. Such "lone" house churches seldom survive over a long period of time, let alone reproduce. We rather see the individual house church as vibrant, yet also quite vulnerable, and volatile. Networking can bring strength and stability to the individual house churches in the fellowship and to their leaders.

2. The other extreme of leadership interaction is that the Fellowship Overseers as a group are the leaders of the churches. All decisions for the house churches would have to be made by the FOB.

In this scenario, the house church is not a real church in itself. It is simply a part of the church, another "small group", and is becomes dependant on the Fellowship Overseers to discern what God's will for them. We believe this loss of autonomy eliminates the tremendous flexibility we have found in the house church model. It sets up a bureaucracy which quenches the free movement of the Spirit. It also leads to greater centralization over time.

Conclusion

The model we have found to be more beneficial looks something like a cross section of the above two extremes. We believe that the house church is a true church, and as such has autonomy and responsibility to discern God's call upon them as a community of Christ. We must note however, that although the house church has its own particular calling as a church as its primary focus, it also cooperates in love with other churches in its area as well as in other parts of the world. House churches in the Bible were interested in one another, cooperated by sharing resources and personnel with one another, and were ready to help when there were needs, even at great sacrifice (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). Therefore, although the house church is a church, it also normally exists in a community of churches with a healthy interdependence.

This is true of all churches, of course, not just house churches or those in our immediate fellowship. As such, we help other churches and house church fellowships in any way

possible. We will endeavor to model this healthy, mutual interdependence in the East Providence Fellowship of House Churches.

II. Leadership In The Church

With this mutual interdependence in mind, let us review the leadership structure of the house churches. Then we will attempt to find a working structure for the Fellowship Overseer Board which will serve as a balance between the above two extremes. We begin with the commitment to have at least two men responsible for guiding each house church.

1. The ideal situation (though often impractical) is to have at least two elders responsible for the oversight of a house church. Elders are men who have been trained by other leaders and confirmed by the congregation in which they serve. The two (or more) together form the leadership team. Although they may not be equal in ability or experience, they function as a team and therefore must seek corporate unity among themselves when guiding the assembly.

These elders must keep seeking men to be trained for leadership for future expansion. Sometimes God blesses an assembly with more than two elders. In this case it is likely that God has a special plan for this assembly, to establish new congregations, help other congregations that are short of leadership, or commission some of these elders for itinerant church planting.

2. In some cases there may be only one elder in a house church. This elder should be training a deacon for help in shepherding and guiding the flock (see *Shepherding Deacon: Appendix 17*). In the unlikely case that there is an elder and no shepherding deacon available, the elder should seek the counsel of other elders or church planters as he guides the house church, in order to maintain team leadership and avoid an independent (and often destructive) spirit. If this danger exists, the church should place itself directly under the authority of another house church or members of the church planting team.

3. On occasion there may be a house church with no elders. In this case the leaders of that particular house church will be shepherding deacons, accountable to an elder of another house church or a church planter. Upon completion of training, their mentor(s) will recommend one or more of the shepherding deacons to the congregation for ordination to eldership. If there are not at least two men available and willing to serve as shepherding deacons, the church should consider disbanding or placing itself directly under the authority of another assembly.

III. Interaction Among Leaders Of The House Churches

The leaders of each house church and the church planters working with that fellowship serve on the fellowship overseers board. Several questions occur as the fellowship expands through the establishment of new house churches: How does this board expand? What is its function? What are its limits?

1. How does the board expand?

- a. The Fellowship Overseers Board should start with at least two male CP's working in the fellowship. As they train men for leadership they would recommend to the board that these men be included on the board. The Fellowship Overseers Board would accept their confirmation through prayer and by asking questions clarifying the readiness of each individual to be included on the board.
- b. When a man is appointed to leadership, he then mentors new men, and sponsors these new leaders for service on the board when they are proven. The new men will be received upon confirmation by the Fellowship Overseers Board.
- c. As new house churches are established through the activities of the existing house churches, the leaders will likely be either church planters, elders or shepherding deacons who have been trained in the above fashion. Thus they will either already be on the board or as explained above.
- d. When a new fellowship is formed, the Fellowship Overseers Board should be established immediately, consisting of those who have already served on the FOB of the previous fellowship. Thus all Fellowship Overseers are brought on to the board by personal mentoring and personal recommendation of an already existing leader. This guards the quality of leadership in the house churches and the FOB.

2. The Overseers depend on one another for several things:

- a. **Personal Accountability.** A covenant between the overseers helps define accountability. A model covenant appears at the end of this paper based on the covenant between church planters on the team.
- b. **Corporate Accountability.** We understand that God primarily directs His church through the congregation. However, an individual house church does not exist in a vacuum, but rather in an extended network with other assemblies. Therefore each house church realizes that some of its decisions may directly affect other assemblies. When facing a decision which might affect other house churches in the fellowship, the leaders should seek the counsel of the FOB. In some cases the decision may have to be held in abeyance until the FOB can pray and seek God's face for the fellowship of churches.
- c. A house church may request the board or its representatives to help in an internal house church matter which it cannot handle. This is likely if the problem involves the leaders of that house church. In this case the representative(s) of the FOB help sort out the facts and responsibilities so that the house church can see clearly what to do, thus protecting its autonomy. A good example of this is found in I Corinthians 5. In some cases specific recommendations may be made by the representatives such as: removing a leader, bringing the congregation under the auspices of another assembly

for a time, dissolving the house church, etc. If the congregation is unwilling to comply, the representatives bring the recommendations back to the board for advice, counsel, or action.

d. Such a decision by the board might cause a house church to leave the fellowship. The church should be cautioned to proceed with great care (see Appendix 15 "Reasons for Breaking the Church Covenant" for help on this). Such a congregation should immediately seek fellowship with other assemblies for protection and strength.

3. Board Decision Making: The board meets monthly for the purpose of prayer, encouragement, giving and receiving updates and counsel, and making decisions. FOB decisions are required in the following cases:

a. To appoint board officers such as moderator, financial secretary, and clerk. These appointments will be reviewed annually.

b. To receive new board members.

c. To dismiss board members for disciplinary reasons (notify and warn the affected congregation).

d. To authorize fellowship expenditures.

e. To determine if an overseer should be financially supported and set the support levels.

f. To define new policies or policy changes which will affect other house churches (eg. mode of baptism).

g. To coordinate fellowship-wide activities such as fellowship seminars, courses, evangelistic events, etc.

Covenant Of The Fellowship Overseers

The purpose of the Fellowship Overseers Board is to aid and strengthen existing house churches in the (Specify Network). The FOB exists to foster accountability, shepherding, and interaction of the leaders of the (Specify Network of Fellowship).

We, as leaders of specific house churches, realize that we need to be accountable to each other since we are not infallible or invulnerable to the devil's schemes.

"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you an overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves." Acts 20:28-30

With this in mind we covenant to be on guard for each other in brotherly love.

Specifically We Covenant: To shepherd one another by being on the alert for any sin or activity of the flesh by which the Adversary could influence the working of our churches. In the event of any such activity, we will approach the brother in the spirit of Matthew 18.

Recognizing that leaders may often sincerely and sharply disagree, we covenant to strive to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

We Covenant: To strive to understand one another, seeking to accept differing views, to be slow to take offense, but always ready to forgive, securing reconciliation without delay when offenses and misunderstandings occur among us.

We Also Covenant: To maintain the Christian disciplines of prayer, scripture reading, public assembly and fellowship. To encourage the same on the part of the other overseers and our families.

We Further Covenant: To actively and diligently encourage our congregation to grow in its relationship to the other churches in the network. To diligently pray for the effective ministry of the (Specify Network or Fellowship), for our particular house church, and for the establishment of new local churches.

In the event that we believe the Holy Spirit is directing us to change our calling (eg. move geographically, stepping down from eldership) we will discuss this with our immediate leadership team as well as with the FOB. In the event we do leave we will endeavor to place ourselves under the protection of another church as soon as possible.