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The Church that Meets in Malissa's House

MALISSA ENDSLEY

The letter began: To the church that meets in Malissa's house. It could have been written almost 2,000 years ago, but it was written last month. The apostle Paul wrote many such letters to Christians living in Rome, Corinth, Colossae and other places. This one was written not on ancient paper, but on a computer screen. It was an e-mail from my church planting coworker, Jared Looney, encouraging the people who gather as a church in my apartment on Cruger Avenue in the Bronx, New York.

The church that meets in my apartment is one of four that make up Bronx Fellowship of Christ, a network of house churches or what has come to be called simple or organic churches. Thousands of such churches are alive and well in North America. Many, many more are thriving in other parts of the world.

Most believers have probably heard of the underground church in which people meet in homes or other secret places because their nation's government has outlawed Christianity. Or some might think a house church is a start-up church that will one day grow into a larger congregation that can afford a church building. Or perhaps others think a house church is created when people who have an idiosyncratic set of doctrines can't get along in a "regular" church. None of these is the kind of house church or simple church I am talking about.

What we are trying to do in New York City and what others are doing in Southern California, Central Texas and beyond, is a way of doing and being church that is so simple that any believer would respond by saying, "I could do that!"¹ We want believers to be able to say that, because it is imperative for Christians to be planting more churches to reach more people in North America. As evidenced by the article in this issue by Stan Granberg, Kent Smith and Gailyn Van Rheenen, the church in North America is in decline while the population is growing, making this continent one of the largest missions fields in the world. The informal, relational and mobile nature of the organic or simple church makes it best prepared to saturate a region.²

A simple church has a small, participatory, family-like environment focused on relationships and the development of disciples of Jesus Christ. Those of us who are planting simple churches are doing so because we believe that the ways in which we "do church" can greatly affect discipleship and evangelism. In 1 Cor 14.26, Paul writes, "When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." This passage seems to assume that all believers can and should actively participate in any gathering, because the Holy Spirit can and will speak to the community through any believer. If church is understood as a highly orchestrated service performed by professionals before a large crowd, the result can be passive members who act more like spectators than empowered agents of God's kingdom.³

1. www.house2house.net.

2. Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 27.

3. *Ibid.*

However, if disciples are actively seeking God through daily spiritual disciplines, they will have much to share with each other when they come together. In a simple church, it is hoped that the people of God's family come together thinking "What can I contribute to our family's worship of God today?" rather than "What will I get out of this today?" This shift away from a consumer-driven culture is very difficult and we have not yet succeeded in the Bronx, but we are working in that direction.

To remain highly interactive and participatory for the sake of spiritual formation and worship, simple churches must remain small. However, the desire is still for the kingdom to grow. For this to happen, simple churches must not grow into larger churches and build church buildings. Rather, they grow by multiplying into more simple churches. People are brought to Christ through natural relational connections, and they are mentored in reaching others in their relational circles and new simple churches are formed. If a church is healthy, it is assumed that it will reproduce other churches just as commonly as parents raise their sons and daughters to raise their own families in turn. Because church is understood as the family of God walking together with him daily and gathering to share what he is doing among them, every Christian can be a church planter and every home can be a church.

Furthermore, existing church buildings can be training centers. Buildings are not wrong or immoral in themselves. Buildings are not really the problem; the problem is when people tend to function as if the building were the life source rather than God. Church buildings have the power to breed a "temple mentality" in which we expect people to come to us rather than bringing God's message to where they are. If we want people to have a Christian faith that pervades every aspect of their lives, then why shouldn't church happen wherever life happens? Church can meet anywhere: homes, offices, restaurants, bars, coffee shops, school campuses, beaches, parks, locker rooms, any ordinary place where people gather. Bronx Fellowship of Christ is a network of churches that meet in apartments and houses. But there have been times when a church has met in a Bronx park or diner. And there are also times when the entire network gets together and rents a space in a public school to worship God and enjoy each other.

The location where Christians meet together is actually not the ultimate concern of those who are in simple churches. However, simple churches recognize the pitfalls of gathering in structures built for religious services and try to avoid them for the sake of flexibility needed for kingdom expansion. Church planter Neil Cole of Long Beach, California, even found that the idea of opening a new coffee shop in order to provide a gathering place to reach people may have seemed relevant to the culture, but it still would have provided a barrier to people. He found that it was much more effective just to go to the coffee house where people already hung out, start making friends and sharing the gospel. Simple churches were formed from those relationships. It took time and energy, but the time and energy was spent on the relationships, not on building and operating a new coffee shop. Presumably, it required money for coffee, but not for a building!

The urbanization of our world means more and more people will be living closer together in cities with increasingly expensive and scarce real estate. So a way of doing church that does not require great amounts of money for land and buildings is becoming more and more necessary. In New York City, real estate prices are prohibitive for our working class church even if we wanted to build a building. More than one thousand people live on my block and every square foot is covered with apartments. There is no room for a church building to be built on Cruger Avenue in the Bronx, but there is plenty of room for many simple churches (in addition to the two already there) among the apartments.

As Granberg, Smith and Van Rheenen mention, the decline of trust in institutions has contributed to the decline of the church in North America. The grassroots nature of a simple church, however, is more appealing to many disenchanting people. I can think of several people in Bronx Fellowship of Christ who have said that they "would not have darkened the door of a church building" but they were willing to explore faith in Jesus because the simple church was not intimidating.

I do not want to give the impression that "simple" is synonymous with "easy." When church is about

people living as the family of God, there are going to be some family problems. When people are meeting together in small clusters, sins will likely be exposed more quickly than if they were just a few faces among thousands. But it is all the better for problems to be brought into the light so that the Lord can deal with them. Furthermore, it is not attendance at a church gathering that will automatically transform someone's life; that transformation can only be done by the Lord.

The simple church takes its cues from lessons learned in cross-cultural missions. When missionaries go to another culture to make disciples and begin churches, they study the language and culture of the people. They learn to communicate the gospel in ways that will be understood. The new believers are sent to share the message with their own people. New faith communities are formed in ways that fit the customs of the people. Missionaries try hard not to impose their own culture on those they are now living among. The churches they begin must be able to function well by relying on God, the Bible and themselves, rather than on foreign resources. The missionary's job is to introduce the gospel into a culture and work his or her way out of a job.

Even when no cultural barrier is crossed, by keeping church as simple as possible, barriers are lowered for new churches to be formed and the kingdom of God to be expanded. Doing church in a complicated way, requiring professionals and buildings, greatly slows down how many churches can be planted. Simple church puts church functions back in the hands of the "ordinary" disciple. When someone becomes a disciple, he or she does not act as a spectator but a fully engaged worshiper-worker empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Simple church proponents are not proposing to tear down all the church buildings and restructure all conventional congregations into simple churches; that would cause unnecessary trauma. Simple churches are not a magic bullet for the kingdom, but they should be considered one of the most viable ways for new church planting to be done in North America.

Then, once many simple churches are planted, their true test is not how many people meet together in those simple church gatherings, but whether the world is being transformed because of all the disciples of Jesus Christ whose own lives have been transformed.

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FURTHER RESOURCES:

www.bronxfellowship.org
www.cmaresources.com
www.house2house.net
www.metro-soul.org
www.rurevolutionary.com

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